

# Due Process

*Demongate High Book 1*

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Demongate High

Due Process

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**For Sean**

Without whom, this book would never have existed



## DUE PROCESS

### 1

#### **The Letter**

*Calm, relaxed breathing is essential for stressful situations.*

“Happy Birthday, Dean,” said the man standing across the dimly lit table, having set a cake down in front of me. The fourteen candles atop it created a soft glow about the room, shadows flickering about the walls.

“Thank you, father,” I replied. Of course, I called this man father, but he wasn’t my father at all. Also absent from the room was my mother, of whom I had no more memory than vague feelings from long, long ago. This man’s name was Donald Lum, and he had looked after me since the time my parents disappeared, twelve years or so ago, according to him. I had asked him many times about their disappearance and how I came to live with him instead, but always it was the same answer: “When you’re older.”

I had little hope even now that turning fourteen would change this policy, and so I did not expect any different answer today than before. I had almost given up hope, thinking that perhaps they had died in some gruesome manner from which he was sparing me. He was not unkind, and he was caring, but I think there was always a tension between us; he raised me, but he was not my father. I often asked myself, late at night when I had trouble sleeping, if that really mattered one way or the other. I knew it didn’t, but yet, somehow it did. And never knowing a mother, well, I knew people who had lost their mother to divorce or death, which would have been easier. Mine was just... gone. Gone where? “When you’re older.”

You may ask me as you gaze about the dining room in our modest suburban home, if you are turning fourteen, where are your friends, Dean? Why do they not share the table along with your foster parent on this happy occasion? The truth of the matter was I had few friends, for one reason or another. Mainly I just liked being left alone, but more than that, I felt I was

different, somehow, to those around me. They seemed to sense it too, and basically left me to myself. I didn't mind, honestly. I occupied my time with building things, like models, or helping Donald repair watches or jewelry in the tiny shop he ran outside the city. He said I had good watchmaker hands, whatever that meant, and he often set me to simple tasks like replacing main springs and verifying steady pulse rates in pocket watches. Are you curious about what city we're in? Kokomo, Indiana. Excitement capital of the world, to be sure.

Blowing out the candles, I belatedly realized I had forgotten to make a wish. But really, even if my parents did come back, I wouldn't even know them, so what was the point? Donald and I spoke, and ate cake, and when the dishes were cleared away he cleared his throat and took on a serious look.

"Sit a moment longer, Dean. There are a few things I need to give you today. Let me go get them."

"Sure thing," I replied, slightly mystified. I had been given my gifts before dinner, that very afternoon. What else could there be?

Soon enough Donald returned carrying a small box and a padded envelope. He sat down and stared at them for a moment, then sighed and pushed them over to me.

"The envelope first, alright? The box after I explain a few things."

Getting more curious now, I reached for the envelope and spun it around to read who it was from. Somewhat surprisingly for all the fuss Donald was making about it, there was no return address. I pulled the tab and pushed it open a little, tipping it into the overhead light now illuminating the room. Something that looked like cloth patches and some stapled together letters were inside, so I shook them out. Onto the table fell three red and white cloth patches, each with the same funny symbol on them. They immediately reminded me of the pieces of paper you sometimes see thrown around by Japanese cartoon characters. I looked up at Donald. "What's this?"

"You should read the letter and stuff and then I can answer all your questions."

I shrugged and pulled out the papers, seeing the top one as some sort of introduction letter or something. I read it. Then I read it again. Then I flipped through the other pages, and read the letter again.

"This is some sort of joke, right?"

"I can work with that."

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“What?”

“Sorry, I just wasn’t sure what to expect when you read it.”

“What am I supposed to say? It says here I’m the ‘best and brightest’ which is a big laugh, but the upshot is you’re sending me away to some strange school I’ve never heard of? Why?”

“It has to do with your parents, I’m afraid.”

“What? My- now wait just a minute! What about my parents? Are you finally going to tell me what happened to them?”

“I’m finally going to tell you about the last time I saw them, yes. I am quite truthful when I say I really have no idea what happened to them.”

I looked back at the letter, and the packet containing maps, class schedules, club descriptions, then back at Donald. “So how does this school relate to my parents?”

“Your mother went there.”

“What, really?” I said, excited now. “Is attending classes there going to help me track her down or something? What’s this all about?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not doing a very good job of this. I’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you for a couple of weeks now as your birthday was coming up. I still don’t have any real idea. Look, just open the box, and I’ll start at the beginning.”

“Whatever you say,” I said, more confused now than ever. The box, I now noticed, had one of those weird pieces of paper on it covering the top, presumably glued over the flaps, as I didn’t see any tape on the edges. I held up the badge, “Does this have anything to do with...”

“Yes, it has everything to do with that.”

I nodded, looking the box over. Basically just a beat up cardboard box, about five inches to a side, square. Apart from the paper on top, it was taped on the bottom and that was it. I put a finger under the top flap and tried to tear the paper off so I could open it. To my surprise, it didn’t budge.

“Try putting your hand over it and saying your name,” Donald suggested.

I looked at him like he was crazy, and got up to get the utility knife out of the drawer in the other room. I came back in and clicked the knife up, stabbing it down into the paper. Again I was surprised when the knife was stopped cold by this flimsy piece of paper, rather than tearing in two like I expected.

“Like I said, you better just tell it who you are or we’ll be here all night.” The edges of his mouth quirked up a little like he was trying very hard not to smile. I glared at him.

“A piece of paper is going to get the better of me, is that what you’re saying?”

“It’s called a *ward*. And yes, it is. I think the box is a *talisman* of some sort, keyed to the *ward* to be *invulnerable*, as your mother told me only you would be able to open it.”

“What, it’s from Krypton? It’s a cardboard box, I’ll just cut it here.” I proceeded to try stabbing into the side of it, then to slice the tape from the bottom. As I suppose you can guess by now, I didn’t get very far.

“Ready to give up?” said Donald, a slight twinkle in his eye. It seemed now he was struggling not to *laugh*. Great, it looked like I was being defeated by a cardboard box tonight after all. I sighed. “We’ll play it your way then,” and put my hand on the top: “Open up, magic box, for I, Dean Chesterfield, command it!” The box crumbled to dust before my very eyes.

“What?!” I said, jerking my hand away. “That did *not* just happen.”

“She was always a trifle showy. Are you okay?”

“Fine, it just surprised me, that’s all. What happened? How did it just crumble like that?”

“Wards and *talismans* can do pretty much anything if you can put the time and effort into making them,” Donald replied. “So let’s see what she left you after all that.”

“You don’t even know?”

“No clue,” he said, shaking his head.

I looked down, there was a small object wrapped in tissue paper now sitting on the table where the box had been. I was torn between asking what, exactly, a *ward* was, but figured it could wait, so I carefully unwrapped the object and set aside the paper. We both stared at it for a moment.

“It’s an egg.” I was finding myself rather unimpressed after the whole disappearing box trick.

“A blue egg, to be specific,” said Donald. “At least that’s what it looks like to me.”

I picked it up; it didn’t feel hollow, and it seemed a little heavier than I expected. I held it up to the light and it didn’t seem like any light got through, so it must have been solid all the way through. It didn’t feel like wood or stone, but it didn’t feel like an egg either. It wasn’t really an egg, it was just sort of egg shaped, and a very deep blue.

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“Dark blue, right?” I asked.

He nodded, knowing I was color blind.

I gently brought it to my ear and shook it. No sound emerged at all.

I set it down, stumped. “Well, if possible, I would like an explanation now.”

“Let me do one more thing,” said Donald, taking the egg. He closed his eyes, seeming to concentrate. “No,” he said, finally, “if it has power I can’t detect it. But then I’m not very good at it, and it could have been shielded.”

“Now what are you talking about?”

He set the egg down and looked at me. I didn’t notice how, instead of rolling one way or the other like a normal egg would have, this one stayed right in the same spot Donald had set it. “The time has come to tell you about your heritage,” he began. “Guess I’ll just jump right into it. You’ve never felt quite right living here, have you? I know you haven’t, it’s a dumb question. What if I told you there was a reason for that?”

“I’m really from another planet?” I said, rolling my eyes. “Or maybe a wizard?”

“Close. You’re an *artificer*. Like me you have certain abilities that most people don’t. In your case, you can use your spiritual energy to create objects of great power.”

“Come off it!”

“I’m serious. You saw that box, didn’t you? You could have gotten the chainsaw out of the garage and gone at it all night, and all you would have had at the end of it was a really dull chainsaw blade.”

I glared at the egg as though it was the cause of all the troubles in the world, and started to hope, just a little, that this whole thing wasn’t some elaborate birthday prank.

“So why am I only hearing about all this now?”

“A couple of reasons. First, you’re old enough to keep the secret that there are powers in the world and that you yourself have them. Second, those powers are awaking in you now that you are growing up, so it’s time to start your training. And third because your parents, before they disappeared, gave me orders not to.”

“And my mother gave you this... egg?”

“That’s right. She came to me one afternoon and said she and your father had to go away. She couldn’t tell me why when I asked, and left you with me, along with this box. I thought maybe she was just a little frazzled in raising her first child, and that she would be back in a few days. But she

didn't, and when I checked out the box I found I couldn't open it. Now that you have, and it's just this weird egg thing, I'm even more puzzled. I mean, it's not a keepsake, it has no value for you because it's just a thing. A keepsake holds a memory, and I assume you have no memory of this blue egg?" He waited for me to shake my head. "So it's a puzzle, maybe one only you can solve as you grow in power. And grow in power you will, because of your father."

"My father had power too? What could he do?"

"A little of everything."

I stared at him for a moment, but he said no more. "That's not an answer," I said slowly.

"Suffice to say for now that you're very gifted in the power department. Study long and hard the next twenty years or so, and there will be nothing on this earth that could take you down. He only learned of his power after watching your mother make things, and deciding to help her out. She was making a bunch of piddly, identical *wards* as I understand it, and so he, as a joke, started imitating her. She was telling him exactly what to do with *spirit energy* to make it work. Imagine their surprise when it actually worked for him. They looked into it and found out he could basically learn any skill that didn't depend on knowing other skills. That'll make sense later, don't get hung up on that. Anyway, they traveled around a little talking to various people with powers and he picked up a few things. You, on the other hand, will go to school and learn whatever you want, and become way better than your mother and father combined, because you can do things neither of them can."

"I... rather like the sound of that," I said, smiling.

"I thought you might."

We both paused, looking down at the egg.

"So my mother could make things? Like what?"

"Like impossible to open boxes that crumble to dust, or swords that can kill demons, or bullets that can knock over buildings. And *wards*, basically just paper with symbols written on them that, when activated, accomplish something specific and then burn up, like you saw."

"Back up— demons?"

"Oh yes. Why do you think they call the school 'Demongate High?' It's not just a name."

This was a lot to take in. "How do you know all this?"

"Because after the disappearance of your parents, the Foundation—they're the people that run the school— well, the whole world really, tried to

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track them down. Believe me, their resources are vast and varied. When that failed, they asked if I would take you in, and as your parents had asked me the same thing before they disappeared, I agreed it was the right thing to do. Certain things were explained to me when I came into my power, if you'll call it that."

"That's right, you did say you had powers. What can you do?"

"The story of how I became touched with supernatural power is not something I like to relate. It happened much later in my life, as I didn't inherit power like you did. Quite honestly it was forced on me, and at a terrible cost. It wasn't something I chose. As for what I can do, it's not all that useful in the long run. In any case, I agreed not to exercise it and the Foundation agreed to let me continue living here instead of moving to the island where the school is. Not much call for my talents there, you understand. No, this is about you and what you want for the future, not me. You're being handed the opportunity of a lifetime. Schooling with kids your age who are also awakening their own power. The opportunity to "crack the egg" so to speak and find how it relates to your parents.

"For all I know your mother didn't make it, she only protected it and passed the duty of protecting it onto you. But in that case I hope she would have told me that before she left, so that I could have taken greater precautions. Why did she leave so quickly, and why couldn't she tell me why? Why did her husband go with her, but not her only son? Perhaps even more important than that, attend Demongate High to become a true power in the battle with Hell that rages on Earth to this very day."

"That's impossible, someone would have noticed!"

"Well, I say rages, maybe simmers is a better word. Demons and magic users and those that misuse their gifts are all around us, make no mistake. The world needs people of courage, talent, and fortitude to make sure this old Earth keeps turning according to plan."

"And you're saying that's me?"

"It can be, if you let them train you. You can refuse, of course, and just turn your back on the whole thing. Go to a normal high school here in Indiana, with perfectly normal people, and do perfectly normal things. We put the egg away, you never learn how to create magical items or throw energy blasts or use alchemy or request the aid of the spirits or call demons to fight for you or any of it. That way is safer, I won't lie to you."

"I could do all that?"

"It's like I said, you won't lack in the- well, you won't lack in the

versatility department, let's put it that way. In your case, you'll never be able to do most of those things well unless you devote your life to nothing but learning. Normally just mastering a single type of power takes a lifetime; you could conceivably master them all." He smiled a sad smile. "And you have the time, there's nothing to say you can't make yourself ageless, one way or the other, so that kind of time might be nothing to you, if you choose to take that route."

I was stunned. That kind of power was inside me? Is that why I never felt I fit in around here?

"So you're saying that, basically anything I could think of doing, somehow, some way, after going to school at this Demongate place, I could probably find a way to do it? Living forever sounds good for a start. How about getting rich? Maybe save a princess or two from ancient castles?"

Donald nodded, smiling. "Go for the old standards, that's the ticket. Seriously though, to answer your question, yes, all that and more. You don't have to decide now, of course. Read over the student handbook, mull it over. You have time yet." He got up and went into the other room, bringing out a tattered old book with "student handbook" embossed in gold letters on the cover. He handed it to me and stepped back. "Whatever you decide, I'll stand behind it. You're a decent kid, you know? A little quiet, but smart, willful, good with your hands. I've seen those models you made, you have an eye for detail that'll be important for an *artificer*, should you choose to become one. Sleep on it. Take a walk. Whatever. It's your future, and right now many doors are open to you. I'll even train you in watch making if that's what you want, and you can carry on my business here. But if you want my opinion, your future is right here." He tapped on the blue symbol at the top of the letter. "You stick this place out four years, put the effort in, and I'll bet you anything you can go anywhere in the world, name your price, and you'll get it. Now go on, get out of here. I have to wash up these dishes. Happy birthday."

"Thanks— dad."

"Not a problem— son."

I gathered the book, papers and egg up in my arms and went to my room to flip through the pages. I couldn't stop glancing at the egg, resting atop my dresser and thinking about the mystery it represented. There was really no question in my mind; I was attending Demongate High.

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### 2

#### **Arrival**

*When you meet a brand new friend, it opens up a world*

I think I got a little taste, on the way to the school, of what it was like to be a secret agent. It was one airport after another once my father and I said goodbye and I worked my way east toward the coast. From there, it was one rather exciting plane ride to the island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. He had one last surprise for me as we parted at the first airport; five hundred dollars cash!

“Creating *talismans* is kind of expensive,” he explained. “If you want to make your own, you’ll need to buy the supplies, so that’s what this is for, okay? Make me proud.”

I told him I would, and promised to write him about all the cool stuff I made, hugged him once more, and was on my way.

At every stop I would sit and wonder, that kid over there looks to be my age. Is he going to Demongate? What about that short-skirted girl there who was walking so funny? Like she has weights on her feet or something. I was nervous, and excited, and everywhere I looked I imagined what weird powers the people around me had. Oh, I knew that only a small fraction of the world’s population actually had powers, for one reason or another. It was highly unlikely anyone here did, but it was fun to imagine. I figured as I got closer to the place the final plane would leave from, the higher the chances I would see people with real powers.

I was pleasantly surprised when the girl (she was Asian) in the skirt with the heavy legs followed me to the final plane, meaning my suspicions about her were correct. She kept looking at me too, meaning she had noticed my noticing her, and sat down beside me without saying anything.

Apparently the Foundation owned this jet, as an announcement was made when we were in the air. Apparently, anyone on this plane was in some way connected to the school or the Foundation, and that we could talk freely to each other. I wasn't sure how to strike up a conversation with this girl sitting next to me, but I perked up when the stewardess also announced any "unseen" (whatever that was) *wards* could now be removed.

"Finally," the girl next to me said, with an accent, looking down at her legs. She seemed to put her hand over her leg and ripped something off, and a heavy boot appeared to cover it! I jerked backwards and saw a flash as the piece of paper in her hand burned away.

"It was a *ward*!" I blurted out. "That is so cool."

She turned to me and smiled. "Oh, you know about them too?"

"Only a little, I'm an *artificer*, or at least I'm going to be. I guess."

"I guess you can't see them, then?"

"What, the boots? No, didn't that *ward* make them invisible?"

"It said in my packet they would become '*unseen*,' not invisible. Normal people can't see them, but people like us should be able to. But that takes some exposure to unseen things or something, I guess. I couldn't see them either, but sometimes I almost thought I could. It was weird. I thought you could see them because you kept looking at me, so..."

"I was looking at you because you were walking funny." I said. A second too late I realized maybe I shouldn't have said that in quite that way? But she laughed. She had a nice laugh.

"I should have known. Wearing them like this was weird. I could feel them, but not see them, and they're heavy, you know? And I was trying to keep my speed down to regular walking speed at the same time, which I haven't had any practice in. That's probably why. Were you playing 'guess who's going to Demongate' too?"

Now it was my turn to laugh. "Yes, I was. I'm glad I wasn't the only one. Why not just carry them?"

"Oh, that wouldn't have resulted in any uncomfortable questions at all, right?"

"I guess you're right. How did you get through security, though? They would still set off metal detectors, right?"

"Gee, I don't know! Maybe the *ward* took care of that too? Must have, I guess." She seemed to think for a moment, then shrugged and started feeling around on her other leg.

"Wait, don't pull the other one off yet." I said, holding up a hand.

"You want to try and see it, am I right?"

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“That’s right. Now that I know it’s there...” I looked down at her legs. Then I reddened, “Oh my gosh, it looks like I’m just staring at your legs doesn’t it? I mean, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, that is, what I mean to say-”

She laughed again. “It’s okay. Feel it. Go on.”

I hesitantly brought my hand down to her leg, and sure enough, there was another iron boot running up the whole leg just like on the other side. I knocked it with a knuckle. “It’s there all right. Why can’t I see it? Wait! No, it’s gone again.”

“I’m the same way. I get little flashes. Anyway, I’d like to take them off if that’s okay with you.”

“Sure, sure!” I answered, pulling my hand back. Feeling around she tore off another *ward*, which burned away in her hand as soon as she held it up. She stood up and worked her way out of the boots; they really went up her whole leg, more like the bottom half of a suit of armor than just regular boots, then stood them up in between us. She stretched her legs out with a sigh.

“That’s much better.”

I wasn’t sure what to say, so I just looked around the plane. I saw a couple of swords, and what looked like some *cambions* now sitting in chairs where normal looking kids had sat before.

“I’m Yamashita, by the way,” she said, holding out a hand.

“Right! I’m Dean. Say yours again?”

“Ya-ma-shi-ta,” she said exaggerating it. “Though I guess I should get used to using my first name rather than my family name. It feels weird not to be using honorifics and first names and all that. So call me Yasui. That’s easier, right?”

“Yasui, I guess so. So you’re...”

“Japanese. Though my mom was Chinese. So I’m half-and-half. How about you?”

“Red blooded American. At least I guess. My mom and dad, well, it’s a long story.”

“Oh.” she said, and was quiet for a minute.

“So you’re-”

“So are-”

“Sorry.” We both said, and laughed. I was beginning to like this girl. How about that?

“Go ahead.”

“Well, I was going to say, are they just armor or do they have special properties?”

“The boots? Oh, they make me faster at the very least. Didn’t I say that? And I can jump way higher in them too. And I guess I can use them to stand on air, but I don’t know how to do that yet.”

“Wow, I’d like to see that!”

“Maybe when we land.”

We laughed again.

“So you’re an... *inheritor* then?” I asked, struggling to remember what the packet I received had said about other students I would meet.

“Technically I’m a *true martial artist* from my father’s side, but the boots are actually Chinese and they came from my mother’s side.”

“Gee, all I got from my mom was an *invulnerable* cardboard box with a blue egg inside. And I didn’t even get to keep the box, it burned up.”

“Are you serious?” she asked.

“Like I said, it’s a long story.”

“I guess it must be.”

“Just think, long ago in history one of your ancestors asked an *artificer* like me to make him some armored boots, and so he did. Now you get to wear them today. Say, wait a minute.” I said, looking at her.

“What?”

“Won’t you, well, grow? I mean, the boots fit now, right? But will you be able to wear them when you graduate?”

“My mom wore them just yesterday, and she’s taller than I am right now.”

I looked at them again, marveling, and shaking my head. “Amazing. So what did you want to ask me?”

“Oh, just that you were an *artificer*, right? I guess that means you make stuff?”

“Yup. See all the swords and that weird staff thing carried by that kid over there? Each one the work of an *artificer* at some point in history. At least, that’s what I read anyway.”

“Wow, that sounds really useful. I just kick stuff, and you could probably make my boots to boot.”

“Well, sure, maybe, but if you got caught without your boots you could still fight, right? If I got caught without the stuff I made beforehand, I’d be sunk!”

“I guess you’re right. So did you get your powers from your mom or your dad, or don’t you know?”

“I guess my mom was the *artificer*. My dad, well, he found out later he had all the powers.”

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“All the powers?” she echoed, confused.

“Yeah, like I said-”

“It’s a long story-” we both said, and laughed again.

“At least you can laugh about it, I guess,” she remarked when we got ahead of ourselves again.

“I honestly don’t know what to think about the whole situation. I mean, there I was living my life, and suddenly Donald, that’s the guy who’s taken care of me, hands me this packet and box and my life is turned upside down.”

“I can’t even imagine that,” said Yasui. “I mean, I’ve always known about powers in a general way because of my parents, but to just find out one day,” she started looking at my forehead.

“No, I don’t have a scar,” I said, laughing.

“Just checking,” she said, smiling. “I think you have to now, because of you-know-who.”

“Anyway, they aren’t dead. At least, I don’t think they are. Just... well, missing, I guess you’d say. Look, I’ll show you.”

I rummaged around in my carry on bag and came out with the egg. I wasn’t afraid of it breaking, some careful testing on my part showed that it was, like the box it came in, immune to anything I could do to it.

“What a pretty blue,” Yasui exclaimed. “That’s what your mom left you, huh?”

“Yup. Just something to remember her by, or a clue to where she went? Right now I can’t say.”

“Well, I hope you find out.”

“Thanks.” I put the egg away.

“So you were saying about your dad? I mean, if you don’t mind talking about it?”

And you know what? I didn’t. I told her what Donald had told me about my father being able to learn the basics of every power, and how he never attended Demongate High because he didn’t “register” to *seers*, whatever that meant. She listened attentively, and sat back in her chair after my story was done.

“What an amazing story.”

“Really? I mean, they couldn’t have left me a note? Why this egg business?”

“Maybe they’re on some secret mission and they couldn’t!”

“For this long? Anyway, for who? The Foundation or whatever? They could have told me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Still, they think you can do the same thing as your dad? Learn a little bit of every power?”

“That’s what the letter said. Don’t know how they know that, but I’m on a plane heading for a secret island in the middle of the ocean next to a Japanese girl and surrounded by weird looking kids. Right now I’ll believe anything.”

“Yeah, I’m kinda glad you’re nice and normal looking. I mean, I might be able to get used to someone having horns or wings or goat legs or whatever. Right now I think I would have just freaked out if the person next to me changed like that.”

“I know what you mean. I, uh, I don’t usually talk to people this much, you know?”

“Neither do I. I’m pretty shy, actually. It’s weird, it’s like I’ve known you forever. I can’t imagine why I think that though.”

“You’re right-” I said, looking at her more closely. *Have I seen her before, somewhere?* “It does seem that way, doesn’t it? I wonder why?”

And in just that way, the plane ride to the island passed in a flash. We compared schedules, and wondered what our teachers would be like, and just... talked. She seemed really nice, and honestly I had expected to just sit in silence on the way there like I usually did, but talking was... nice. It seemed I had made a friend in an unexpected place, and that made the prospect of being away from home a little easier to take.

Everyone crowded around one side of the plane as the island came into view, until they made us all sit down for the landing. We were met by several teachers and older students, and loaded into buses for the 4km journey from Porta to the school itself. We now had several days to get over our jet lag, explore the school and learn where things were, and in general hang out before classes officially started. I knew where I was going to be spending most of that time- the library. As we all approached the building it seemed pretty normal, but then it was awfully late so it was getting dark. I promised to meet Yasui for lunch the next day at least, and went to go find my room.

I was met there by a boy my age unpacking a suitcase. The first thing I noticed was the sunglasses he was wearing. At night. He had black hair, and was a bit more muscular than I was, I thought. He was slightly taller too, but there was something delicate looking about him that I couldn’t place. Those sunglasses though...

*Who exactly am I rooming with?* I thought.

## DUE PROCESS

Still, he stuck his hand out and introduced himself right away.

“So you are my, how do you say, roommate, yes? It is nice to be meeting you. I am Osman, let me know if you need help to unpack.” He spoke with what I assumed was a Russian accent, my only clue being all those James Bond movies I had watched with my foster father.

“Thanks,” I answered. “I’m Dean, nice to meet you too.”

“You were sitting next to pretty girl on plane, no? The one with the boots?”

“That’s right.”

“Ah, I thought so. I see very well, you know? Your energy, it is not like the others. I am thinking you are special in some way, yes?”

“I’m surprised you see anything with those glasses on.”

“Many say this to me. The glasses, they are, how you say, so that you are not becoming upset, yes?”

“Why would I become upset?”

“I suppose it is better to show you now, after all, we are roommates, no? For you, I will show,” he said, taking the glasses off. I began to see what he meant. He had eyes, they just didn’t have any color, or pupil in the middle- they were just a solid light purple color.

“Oh. I see,” I remarked, wondering what else I should say.

“At least there was not the screaming. I hate the screaming.” He put the glasses back on.

“Yes, I think the glasses are best. At least for a while, until I get used to *cambions* and things walking around the halls. Are you...”

“No, I am what they call *petitioner*, so I am very far from being a demon.” He saw my confused look. “I can bring angel to Earth temporarily, like a *summoner* can bring the demon.”

“Wow, really? That’s amazing! I wonder if I could do that.”

“No you must be- one moment.”

I looked at him curiously, as he seemed to be listening to someone over his shoulder.

*Now what?* I thought. *Staying here is certainly going to be interesting, isn’t it?*

“My sister was asking me something based on what I saw inside you, and yes, that is what it looks like, exactly. What does it mean?”

He listened again, while I thought *His sister? There’s an invisible person in this room, right now?*

“She wants to know if the name Cain means anything to you.”

“Who does? Is there someone else here?” I looked around.

“Oh, excuse me, yes, I did not explain properly.” He seemed to pause as if listening again, and it seemed like he was reciting something now. “Being a *petitioner*, I had been granted an angel to protect and guide me, an angel of knowledge. Sadly, due to certain circumstances of my birth, the soul of my sister went in his place. So when it was time for my angel to attach himself to my soul, he found my sister already there. Not wishing to kill her, he gave her his knowledge so I would still have use of it, and returned to Heaven. So rather than an angel, my *ESPer* sister protects me instead. She says that perhaps you are related to this Cain in some way, and that is why I see traces of many different powers inside you.”

“Wait, what? I’m sorry, that’s a lot to take in at once. What are you saying?”

He sighed and sat down. “I thought my sister explaining it would be more of the clear. I am starting at the beginning. I am supposed to be twins. One girl, one boy. The girl was to be *ESPer* and I was to be *petitioner*. But something happened, my body took over hers, and we became one body. This is called, how do you say in your language...” he listened again. “Thank you, Kat. Chimera. When this happens, normally the soul of the unborn child is given to another mother so it is not lost, but this time my soul was waiting for my angel to attach itself. So she went there, instead. The power is attached to the soul, you know, not the body. So angel comes down when I am born to begin to protect me, and he finds that space filled! Is very strange to him, he does not know what to do. He thinks, maybe *ESPer* can protect me better than he could, this is maybe plan? So he talks to bosses in Heaven, and they say, give knowledge to child and see what happens. If no works out, soul can be taken back and you can start duties. So he did. With no body, Kat put all time into figuring out powers, so I talk to her all the time. My parents, they worry my “invisible friend” is all in my mind, angel should not talk to me until later in life. Finally she learns enough to make herself seen by them, and demands name. I had always called her “cat” so they named her Katrina. So she looks out for me, and I am protecting us both, yes? Is that more clear for you?”

“Yes, that’s amazing. So, what, you have her liver or something?”

“Something like that, yes. We share this body, as some of it is me and some of it is her. But mine is dominant.”

“Isn’t it kind of, I don’t know, *awkward* to have a girl riding around in your head?”

## DUE PROCESS

“She has been there all my life. Is no big deal now.”

“I guess. So can I see her?”

Suddenly, a form appeared to detach itself from Osman’s body and take a step in front of him. It was like looking at a ghost, and I could only stare. They were twins, there was no mistake, as there was a certain resemblance between them. She was quite pretty, if hard to see exactly, and only a few inches shorter than her brother. She didn’t really have color but her hair was long and straight, and I wondered if she had any conscious control over her appearance. After all, technically she didn’t have a body anymore. I realized I was staring.

“Um, oh, hello. Nice to meet you, Katrina.”

She smiled and turned, going back inside Osman. I heard a “voice” inside my head.

*Nice to meet you too, Dean. Don’t worry, I won’t peep on you. Much.*

“She spoke to me!” I exclaimed, fascinated.

“Yes, is hard for her to use two powers at once, so she usually only does one thing at a time for now. She is getting better though. We make good team.”

“I’m an only child, I can’t imagine how it must be, to be that close to someone else that you literally exist inside them. And she, I mean, Katrina, you act totally independently of him?”

*I sure do. I see what he sees and hear what he hears unless I’m projecting, but I can’t do that for long without dying. I’ll hang out and watch his back when I have to. Otherwise I can use my powers just like I want, when I want, so it’s pretty convenient, given the circumstances. He can call on angels and I can keep him safe while he does it. I think we’ll make a great team. Oh, thanks for addressing me directly, Dean, even my own family likes to pretend I don’t exist. They figure their son was supposed to get an angel, so an angel he should have gotten. We weren’t sure how people would react, so we thought we should keep it a secret. Guess we shouldn’t have worried.*

“I would rather know the truth, and if you ever want to talk, I’m here for you. It must be pretty boring all the time, not being seen or heard unless you use your powers.”

*It is inconvenient, so thanks. You’re a nice guy.*

“So we’re okay?” asked Osman hesitantly.

“Sure.” I said, realizing he was all right. “It wasn’t your fault what happened to your sister, and she is still alive, in a way, so what’s there to be concerned about?” He looked relieved and made good on his offer to help

me unpack. As we did, I thought that this day had been much different from what I had thought it was going to be, and that wasn't bad, no, that wasn't bad at all.

"Say," I wondered, "how come she seems to speak way better English than you do?"

"She has knowledge of angel, which includes English," he replied. "She practice it in her head more than I did."

I looked confused, she didn't have a head.

*He means I did more thinking in English than he did, that's all, so I'm better at it.*

I nodded, understanding.

*So today, I thought, finishing up unpacking, I met a girl in boots, a boy with weird eyes who talks to his half dea- no wait- his alive sister. From her I got a possible clue about my past to ask someone about later- the man named Cain.*

**Introductions**

*Friends and books are both excellent, in their proper time*

When I woke up the next day, my odd eyed roommate had already left. He must have not been as tired as I was, or his sister's soul gave him special powers or something. I dressed, made my way down to the cafeteria, looked for Yasui and didn't find her, then headed to the library. The diversity of people I saw walking around the campus was amazing. There were people with actual halos, devil's horns, a guy that looked like a spider, and I'm pretty sure I saw an older boy carrying a chainsaw sword. Of course there were people from all over- Asian people, people with dark skin, light skin, blue skin, everyone just walking about, doing their thing. Several older boys and girls asked me if I was lost and if I needed any help; they were probably prefects. (I go to a school with actual prefects?) But I knew where I was going- I had a lot to learn, and if I could get a head start on my way, so much the better. Didn't I have an egg to crack, so to speak?

The library, it turned out, had normal books too, the Jane Austen and Mark Twain that had been the stuff of book report nightmares since time immemorial. What I wanted was something a little more "meaty" to sink my metaphorical brain-teeth into. Specifically, how did I, an *artificer*, actually go about creating stuff? I burned to know.

The librarian, who had more stripes on his arm than I did, so was probably an upperclassman, was sitting behind the main desk looking bored. He was rather surprised to see anyone in there before classes even started. He said there was no rule against me reading about stuff, just to remember that actually using my powers while not under the supervision of an instructor was against school policy.

“Not that the rules apply to everyone-” he drawled in a low voice. “Save the world once or twice and you’ll be fine, you can do what you want.”

“What?! Save the world?”

“Nothing, forget I said anything.”

“Oohkay.”

I had a thought! “Where would I look for information about a man named Cain who can do anything?” I asked, thinking about what my roommate had said last night.

“I don’t know, the Bible?”

“I’m not sure the Bible would really have the information I’m looking for.” *Wait it couldn’t be that guy, could it?*

“Well, he’s in there, but I think...” he went over to the terminal and started typing something. “There is a book, a couple in fact, devoted to him.” He pointed me in the right direction and I thanked him and checked it out. Turns out Cain, one of the first humans, was cursed with immortality by The All-Father Himself, and now wanders around the Earth, unable to go to Heaven.

Most of the early people wouldn’t die, unless they were forcibly killed. There were some still wandering around in secret someplace, having survived to modern times. Cain, on the other hand, couldn’t be killed no matter what you did to him, because of the curse. So he just wandered around, doing his own thing.

Every so often “his own thing” was hooking up with someone and having some kids. Those kids shared his ability to do everything, but with some limitations. The only explanation I could come up with is that my father, or one of his parents, was a direct descendent of Cain! That was a little freaky, knowing that maybe “great grandpa” was *freaking Cain*.

No matter how far back, his powers had passed down to me as well, and that’s why I could learn to do a little of everything. I resolved to look into it some more later, but right now my focus was to learn more about the power my mother had passed to me, that of artificing.

So for a couple of hours I sat and read about exactly what it was we *artificers* did. And the more I read, the more confused I became. Making *wards* sounded kind of, well, silly, to put a very fine point on it. Suddenly I heard a voice from the other side of the table.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?”

I looked up to see Yasui standing there, and wondered what time it was.

## DUE PROCESS

“What time is it?”

“Just past twelve.” She looked over at the stack of books next to me. “I mean, if I’m intruding, I don’t mean to bother you, but you seemed to... yesterday... I guess I’ll just go, I’m sorry.”

She turned and started to quickly walk out.

“Wait!” I shouted.

“Shhhhhh,” hissed the guy behind the desk. “It’s a library, you know!”

“Yasui, come back.” Wow, she was halfway to the door already- oh, she had her boots on again. She turned.

“So it’s okay if we, I mean, if you wanted to-”

“Yes, we can go get lunch, I didn’t mean to stand you up or anything it’s just that I was reading and it’s just amazing what *talismans* can do. Wards not so much but maybe I’m missing something, and I’m rambling now so, uh.”

We both looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“I looked for you at breakfast, but you weren’t around,” I remarked.

“Oh, I move pretty fast,” she said with a wink.

“I thought I felt a breeze, was that you?”

We started to walk out, but the guy behind the counter said, “Hey, you’re going to put all those books back, right?” and pointed over to the stack of books I had been paging through.

“Oh crap, right, sorry. I’ll just be a second, Yasui, let me pick this stuff up. Oh, and I want to take one out.”

She was nice enough to help me put them back, and I gave the librarian my student ID card to take out the book *The History of Wards and Their Impact*.

“A little light reading?” the guy asked, scowling at the book as though it had done him personal harm at one time in the past. *Uh, maybe it fell on his foot sometime, you don’t know.*

“Wards-” I answered. “I’m not sold on them yet. I need to learn more about them.”

“Whatever, man,” he said. Then he leaned over the counter to whisper to me, “Just don’t leave the girl hanging.”

We left rather quickly after that, and I didn’t look back, though I thought I heard him laughing.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“So,” I said, thinking quickly, “how did you find me, anyway?”

“Oh, I just ran the whole place poking my nose into things until I found you. I should have checked the library first. After all, where else would you be?”

I snorted. “I guess. Aren’t you anxious to learn about your powers?”

“Sure, but plenty of time for that. Look around! Just watching all these crazy looking people go by, it’s exciting. I would never go talk to them, of course, but, look, that guy’s wearing full plate armor, and I thought I was overdressed.” She kicked up a heel and did a little skip, making her boots rattle.

“You do seem to have an extra spring in your step today, any particular reason why?”

“Nope,” she said simply, looking at me out of the corner of her eye. “So how’s your roommate, speaking of people?”

“He’s okay, I guess. A *petitioner*, and he’s got the weirdest eyes I’ll be happy to avoid seeing in the future. And he talks to an invisible angel on his shoulder. Has a pretty thick accent too. How about you?”

“Pretty normal, a *spirit energist* I guess. From what I understand our powers are quite similar, though we have different specialties. Do you think I have a thick accent?”

“No, you have a cute accent. There’s a difference.”

We reached the cafeteria and ordered, then looked for a place to sit. I saw a hand wave me over above everyone’s heads, and pointed it out to Yasui.

“Looks like we’re being summoned. Or I guess petitioned?”

She took a step back. “I don’t know anyone here, do you?”

“It’s probably my roommate. Come on, we have to sit someplace, right?”

“Oh, I guess you’re right. Okay.”

As I got closer, I saw it was my roommate, sunglasses and all, and of course I had no idea what his name was, having forgotten, of course. Crap.

“Please be having the seat,” he said, indicating the seats across from him. “And the girl from the plane is with you I see. It is, how you say, delightful.”

“Uh, thanks.” replied Yasui shyly.

“Oh, this is Yasui,” I said, “and what exactly was your name, again? Sorry.”

“It is no a problem, perhaps we should all just introduce ourselves again, no?”

*Oh, so he’s forgotten my name too?* Somehow that made me feel a little better.

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So we all introduced ourselves, Osman, Dean, and Yasui, all from very different parts of the world but now thrown together. I looked around the room, as it seemed there was still one person missing. “You don’t see your roommate here, do you? I’d like to meet her, too.”

She looked, then shook her head. “No, not right now.”

“Too bad I am not the knowing what she looks like, I could find her.”

“Yes,” Yasui remarked, “Dean here said you had unique eyes.”

“You’ll forgive me if I am not the showing them to you right now?”

“It can’t be any worse than spider boy over there. Ugh.” she said, shuddering.

“Yeah, it’s not that bad, Osman.”

“Still, perhaps after the eating, yes?”

She shook her head. “Whatever. Seen anything interesting so far today?”

“Everywhere I look.”

“I know what you mean.” She looked around. “It’s kind of creepy, you know. I mean, I read the student handbook, so I know they aren’t really demons, but take a look. Do you see what I mean?”

Osman and I both looked around the room. It was a pretty normal high school cafeteria from what I could see, not that I had seen all that many. Still, kids talking, joking, eating. Spider boy was sitting by himself, some other *cambions* were talking, boys and girls somewhat apart. What was I supposed to be seeing?

“I see what you mean,” agreed Osman, nodding his head.

“What? What are you guys talking about?” I looked again, wondering what I was missing.

“Look over there,” Yasui said, pointing at the *cambions*.

“Okay.”

“Now look over there.” She pointed in the other direction.

“There’s some people with more holy looking attributes, like halos, and those wounds on that one boy? What are they called?”

“Kat says they are called stigmata,” Osman informed me.

I was still confused about what I was missing.

Osman came to my rescue again. “She is meaning that you don’t see anyone with a demonic feature near the group of people with the holy features. In fact, they are as far apart as the room allows.”

“Right,” allowed Yasui. “The handbook is all ‘In our school we have tolerance and understanding’ but I think prejudice is going to be a big problem here.”

“Well, that doesn’t really affect us, does it? After all- oh, wait, you’re a *petitioner*, huh? I guess it might affect us after all.”

“I am having no problem with *cambions*, it is not their fault they were born that way.”

“But I’ll bet you wouldn’t go out of your way to talk to one, would you?” asked Yasui.

“I do think you are right.”

Yasui looked a little smug. “I just hope fights don’t break out very often here. Of course *seers* probably look out for that kind of thing all the time, breaking up violence before it even gets a chance to get started.”

“Can they see the future?” I asked.

“I think so.”

“Humm, I wonder if I could.”

“You are again saying this,” Osman interjected. “Why?”

“Oh, it’s a-”

“Long story,” Yasui and I said together. We started laughing at each other and Osman just looked confused. Then he turned and seemed to be listening to something, then said, “Of course, excuse me. I had forgotten what you said last night. Please ignore the question.”

“That’s okay, it was pretty late. No harm done.”

We ate in silence for a moment.

“So, what were you finding in all those books you were looking at?”

“It’s so amazing! But, do you really want to hear about it? I mean it’s *artificer* stuff.”

“Why not? It’s important to you, isn’t it?”

“I just don’t want to bore you, that’s all.”

“I too would be curious to know what you have been doing today.”

“Well, don’t say I didn’t warn you. There’s four things an *artificer* can make, right? Wards, pieces of paper with stuff written on them that do things. That’s what I’m not so sure about. Then more permanent stuff called *talismans*, that’s where the real action is, I think. There are all kinds of volumes in the library about *talismans* made by *artificers* over the years, so I can’t wait to learn how to make them. Then you can give abilities to a person with a *talisman* tattoo, which is pretty cool. Basically you put the power into a symbol on paper, and then transfer it to a person, and they get that power.

“Then the most permanent thing is a circle, which you actually have to chisel out of the floor if you want them to stay around. Though I guess you can just paint them on too. So I’ve just been reading about different

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kinds of circles, and *wards*, and *talismans*. I guess *artificers* are more in support roles than anything else, because they can augment other people's powers. It's all really interesting."

"Even mine?" asked Yasui.

"Let's see, how would I help you? Ummm... Oh, okay, there's a Circle of Focusing, that had something to do with energy. Within the circle you can spend more energy or something? Wait, that would suck, being stuck in one spot. How is that circle useful at all? That's the opposite of what you need, as you're more the jumping around kind of fighter, aren't you?"

She looked at me. "Jumping around?"

"Because of your boots."

She smiled. "I know, silly."

"You're just teasing me, aren't you? Anyway, I could make a Circle of Healing, when you're inside you regenerate, but again it has to be centered over a well or spring, so how often is that going to be useful?"

"So what you're saying is, you couldn't really help me at all."

"Not with circles, I guess, no. *Summoners* or *petitioners*, yes, because I can make circles that help them bring beings through or protect them while they make deals. Also they tend to do what they do while just standing around, so it's perfect for them. I could make you a *talisman* that augmented your power, and I guess certain *wards* could keep you from dying if you got really beat up, or heal you later."

"Well let's hope *that* never happens!"

"Yeah, exactly."

"We better get going," said Osman, standing up with his empty tray. "It's almost one."

"What happens then?" I asked.

"There's the orientation assembly today at one, did you forget?"

"I guess I did," I admitted. Now that I thought about it, I did read on the schedule about something at 1:00 PM today. *Glad Osman reminded me.*

"Shall we?" I asked Yasui.

"I would be delighted."

"I'm sure." We all laughed.

So we all made our way to the auditorium. Osman seemed to know the way pretty well, I guess maybe his sister was helping? *Or can he see the way he needs to go to get somewhere? Now that would be a rather neat power.* Standing outside with her arms folded, looking bored, was a brown haired girl in pigtails, wearing glasses.

“I was waiting for you,” she said simply as we walked up.

“Christina! Hey everyone, this is my roommate, the *spirit energist*! This is Dean, who I met on the plane, and his roommate Osman.”

“So the gang’s all here,” she remarked sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

“You’ll have to forgive her. In the twenty minutes we spent awake together she sort of implied she was better than me at fighting and challenged me to a duel after our first year was done. Naturally I accepted, but anyway she seems a little confrontational. Don’t let her bother you.”

“Uh, nice to meet you?” I said, though even I wasn’t convinced by how I said it.

“Come on,” she said, brushing past me and going inside. “We might as well sit together.”

“She seems nice,” I whispered to Yasui, who giggled.

“It’s hard on everyone the first day. Especially if you don’t make a friend right away. Give her a chance, okay?”

“I’m the paragon of giving people a chance, you didn’t know that?”

She just grinned back at me.

So we filed in after her, and found some seats, and waited for everyone to arrive. There were several teachers on stage already, and at exactly 1:00 the principal walked up on stage and started his speech. I was too far away to see what he looked like, but this all seemed well rehearsed to him.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” he started with his outrageous French accent. “I hope you’re all finding your way around the school easily enough. Don’t worry, this assembly will be pretty short. I know you’re anxious to enjoy the rest of the nice weather, so I’ll make this quick.

“First, a reminder that fighting of any kind is not allowed on or off school grounds, especially between those whose powers stem from the Heavens and those that stem from the Demon World. Second, we received a generous donation of several horses in the last few days so there will be a horseback riding club starting soon for any that are interested. There aren’t many slots open, so sign up early. The mobile programming club, focusing on iPhone and Android phones, will of course continue. It seems we’ll also host robotics and jewelry making clubs this year, so keep those in mind when you choose. You must sign up for at least one club, so don’t wait until the last minute or the only thing left will be chess club!” There was some laughter. A couple of the teachers smiled, but others seemed to glare a little harder.

“The pool will be open this afternoon for any that want to swim. Please report any activity which could be ghosts, fairies, elves, travelers

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from other realities, the undead, or 80's rock bands to your nearest teacher or prefect. I will now introduce this year's Prefects and Head Boy and Girl." He waved some students sitting in the front row up, and three girls and three boys got on stage and were introduced. "They are in charge of the dorms and should be obeyed, unless they're speaking gibberish, which really only happened the one time, and we cleared that right up." More laughter. "There are several students I would like to report to my office when the assembly is over for one reason or another. Rather than giving everyone something to gossip about by saying their names, I will now pause while our *ESPer* and *seer* teachers contact those individuals directly."

He paused, and everyone looked around to see if they could somehow tell who was being singled out.

*Dean, can you hear me?*

*Oh, of course it would be me. I mean, no I can't hear you, but I can... whatever you call this that's not hearing.*

Somehow the voice sounded amused. *Very clever, Dean. A very literal mind can be advantageous, but don't take it too far, okay?*

*I'll try.*

*Good. And don't worry, it's just to discuss your schedule. You do have, after all, very special needs.*

There was a pause.

*Sorry, I was waiting for you to say that didn't come out right. I guess you're not going to though. More of that not taking it too far, I guess. I'll be there.*

*Excellent. We all have high hopes for you, you know.*

I felt the presence leave my mind and knew I was alone with my own thoughts again. The assembly quickly wrapped up and we all spilled back out into the afternoon sunshine. Yasui stretched and spun to face us, Christina having stuck with us for the moment.

"Think he was kidding about the ghosts thing?"

"I'm more worried about 80's rock bands. What are 80's rock bands?" asked Osman.

Christina and I both looked at him, unsure if he was joking or not.

"Anyway, now that we're all together, where shall we go? Hey," she said to Christina, "want to see if we can find where they're keeping the horses?"

“Not particularly, no.”

“Aw! What club are you joining, anyway?”

“Archery. Might as well get some practice in instead of riding around on a dumb animal.”

“Dumb animal-” she started but I held up a hand.

“Ladies, as amusing as the coming bickering between you two is going to be, I am one of the lucky few, the proud, the chosen ones.”

“You must be going to the principal’s office?” asked Osman.

“The very place,” I replied. “So I must bid you farewell for now. If I do not return, raise a glass of milk and remember that you hardly knew me.”

“What, did you get in trouble already or something?” asked Christina.

“No, it’s just to discuss my schedule. With the many varied and awesome powers I possess, it’s going to be tricky fitting it all in, you see. Ah, but my life is harsh.” I overacted, putting my hand to my head in mock surrender. Somehow she didn’t seem convinced.

“It’s true,” Osman said, sticking up for me. “When I look at him I see something very different from when I look at you.”

“You didn’t even take your sunglasses off in the assembly, how do you see anything right now?”

“Here we go again,” I muttered.

“Is all right. Is very easy test. Here, take pen and paper.” He took a pad and a pen out of his pocket and handed it to Christina. “Now, go over by tree and write something down on pad. Hold it up. I stay here. Then close pad, come back, and I tell you what you wrote. Even better, stand behind tree and do this.”

“This is some sort of trick,” she said.

“No trick. I show you. Please.”

“Okay,” she said, slowly, and made her way off into the distance behind a tree. I saw her disappear behind it. Osman concentrated on her, then gave a snort. Christina walked back.

“How did you know my father smelled of elderberries?” he asked.

“How did you- Are you a *seer*?”

“Just trust me, my eyesight is very good. I can see energy patterns inside person, inside tree, lines of energy, through walls, very far-”

“Okay, okay, you’ve convinced me.” She handed the stuff back. “Don’t you have someplace to be?” she asked me.

## DUE PROCESS

“I’m going, I’m going. I’ll head back to the library when I’m done I guess, so come look for me there in an hour or so if you want.”

“Sure thing!” said Yasui brightly.

“Good luck,” said Osman.

“...” said Christina.

As I walked away, I heard Yasui saying “So you’re with me on horses, right Osman?”

**Dealing With Authority**

*Best think long and hard about your future, son.*

“Ah good, you’re the first to arrive,” said Mr DeLefeu, the principal, after I walked up the stairs to his office in the central tower of the school. “You’ll need the most time because you have the most options. Come, have a seat.”

I sat down across from him and took the stapled together papers he handed me.

“Now this,” he continued, “is an admittedly brief description of what sort of powers we teach here at the school and what we think might be worthwhile for you to learn. I compiled it one day when I was curious exactly how many powers different people had, and how they could overlap. So I gave some things names, like *focus defenses*, a *true martial artist* technique, but I don’t know exactly what they call it. The description is right next to the name in case it isn’t clear, but this should give you a pretty good idea about things.

“Now keep in mind many skills require a great deal of study and mastery of other, lesser skills. Take *teleportation*, for example- you must be very good at both leaving your body, a skill we call *bilocation*, and being seen by others while outside your body, a skill we call *projection*. Only once you can take your non-physical form somewhere else can you begin to work on taking yourself and others physically there. Are you following me?”

I nodded. “You can’t operate on brains until you’ve peeled a grapefruit skin half off without any juice coming out.”

He chuckled. “Yes, something like that. Being, as you are, able to learn the basics of many skills, we’ve highlighted some of the more useful ones you might want to look into learning. There are really no “bad” skills

## DUE PROCESS

to learn; you never know when something will come in handy, after all. In the end there's only so many hours in the day so some restraint is necessary. Of course, if you wanted to devote your life to study, and came here to teach- but that's neither here nor there. Naturally you want to learn as many different skills as we can teach you, but at the same time, we have an obligation to provide you a classical education as well. Plus you are technically an *artificer*, so the bulk of your training should be focused on that. Here's the deal: We've made an exception to your schedule and put you in both ability focused studies classes this year, periods 7 and 8. The first is your regular *artificer* one, and the other you'll rotate between various powers until you've learned everything you want from each. Sound fair?"

I nodded.

"Of course, like I said there's only so many hours in the day. Where normal students have "gym" class Monday, Wednesday, and Friday as part of the "Health and Physical Education" class, you'll be having your extra "ability focused studies" class. Tuesday and Thursday you'll still have to attend the Health part of the class, that is, the lecture. How does that sound to you?"

"I think learning some skills I can use all my life sounds better than hitting a baseball or trying to make baskets with 7 foot tall *cambions* on the other team."

"It's actually more about demon combat and the like, but it doesn't get serious until later years. You can skip it for a year, and not be too far behind. You may want to start working with weights or develop your own exercise program at night, just so you don't start wasting away."

"In my free time, you mean?" I said, smiling.

"Exactly!" he exclaimed. "When you're not practicing lifting objects with your mind or throwing energy blasts or turning lead into gold. Uh, that's against Foundation law, by the way- The gold thing, I mean. So don't do that."

"Don't make gold, got it."

"Right. So there's a room over there you can use. Look the list over, note what you might want to learn, and the order in which you might want to learn it, and we'll see what we can do to accommodate you. Each set of skills from each type of power should only take you a week or so. Remember, you can only learn the basics of each type of skill, so while a real *ESPer* could learn *telekinesis* well enough to flip a car over, you might manage a large textbook. So once you've mastered a skill to that level, you can safely move on to the next one. So don't be stingy picking things out."

“Okay,” I said, pleased. *I was afraid the teachers here were going to be “this is what we’re teaching you and you’re going to like it!” But this was a much more balanced approach.* I was impressed, but of course the teachers here had to be more flexible than normal, given the range of talents the students manifested. This was just another extension of that way of teaching, in the end.

So I looked the list over. First on the list was the alchemy skills, of course. Maybe turning lead into gold was forbidden, but this skill *transmogrification* I thought might come in very handy. From what I read, most *artificers* had to tediously make any jewelry or items they wanted to become *talismans*. If I could take a lump of metal and just will it into a certain shape, or change it from clay into aluminum, that would save me a lot of time. I also wondered if I could make a *ward* and then transmute it into a dart or something, to make it easier to throw?

The next group that caught my interest was the *spirit energist* stuff. These people could create energy barriers and energy blasts, which seemed useful. After that, maybe learning some of what Yasui was going to learn, some *true martial artist* skills like *focus defenses*, letting me react defensively quicker. The school had fire drills for demon attacks, for Pete’s sake, I needed to be able to defend myself. At least a little, right? *Energy transfer* also seemed useful, letting me pull energy out of people into myself, or give it to others.

Then there was the *ESPer* stuff, real classics like causing objects to burst apart or move with only my mind. Also there was a skill *postcognition* where I could touch an object and see part of its history.

Then rounding it out was calling out my *spirit projection* and calling other spirits to help me like a shaman was able to.

I was a bit taken aback. That was it? That wouldn’t hold me for more than a couple of months, would it? I looked the list over again- no, that was right. So many skills depended on other skills like the principal said. Oh, I wouldn’t mind picking up a couple things like *focus senses* and *summoning* but maybe being able to do a little of everything wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. I must have taken longer looking it over than I thought, as Mr DeLefeu came into the room to see how I was doing.

“Okay, I guess. There just doesn’t seem to be a lot I can really learn.”

He looked skeptical. “Let’s see what you’ve chosen.”

I handed him the list. “Hummm, about 19 skills, not bad. It looks like you’ve pulled from a bunch of different ‘schools,’ so to speak.”

## DUE PROCESS

“But even if I learn only one skill a week, that’s only about five months!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” he replied with a smile. “This is just the first pass. This is the stuff you really, really want to learn that you think will be useful to you right away. And it’s like learning a language, the more languages you speak, the easier it is to learn new ones. So you focus on these skills the first couple of months, and you decide, hey, I really need to learn this certain thing because this weird thing is happening and learning it would help us solve the weird thing.”

“Does that often happen?”

“To some, yes, all the time. To others, not so much. Given how special you are, I’m guessing yes.”

“I see,” I said, looking at the list again.

“And if you really get interested in one area, you can put effort into unlocking that power fully within yourself. Then you’ll be able to learn all the skills of that power, just like you can learn all the skills of the *artificer* now.”

“You mean it?”

“Well, that’s the theory anyway. There have been so few with your unique background that it’s hard to know for sure. There are reports of that happening, of course, but we’ll be keeping a close eye on your development to see just how good you can be.”

“I guess I’ve got a lot to live up to.”

“Not to worry. You’ve got four years, you don’t have to learn it all tomorrow. Take it easy, enjoy yourself and most of all, pace yourself. Don’t take on too much, or get hung up trying to improve these skills too much. Think of them as a little bonus, an edge you have over other *artificers* you can use in a pinch. Don’t let them define you, okay?”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. So is this list okay to start?”

“Sure thing! We can get you in with the *alchemists*, all six of them or whatever, right away.”

“That few?”

“I’m afraid so. Pretty rare, *alchemists*, even today. Of course any *alchemist* worth anything ultimately makes a *Philosopher’s Stone* and lives a couple hundred years at least, so there’s no shortage of them, even though we only get a couple of new ones a year. Anyway, I’ll take this and work up a class list for you, if there’s nothing else.”

I suddenly had an inspiration. “You’re an *artificer* yourself, aren’t you?”

“That I am. I’m actually speaking French to you right now, did you notice that?”

“Your accent is gone!”

He tipped his head and showed me behind his ear. “It’s a translator I made. It gives me the *cambion* power of *communication*, so basically I can speak any language and you hear it as your native language, and I hear what you say in my native language.”

“That is so cool.”

“I’m glad you think so. Did you have a specific question for me?”

“Two, actually.”

“Shoot,” he said, sitting down across from me.

I pulled the egg out of my pocket and handed it to him. “What do you make of this?”

“Hummm,” he said. He closed his eyes, concentrating on it. “I’m stumped, what is it?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. My mother left it behind for me, before she disappeared.”

“Oh, Barb Chesterfield, of course. We had *seers* looking for her and her husband for weeks after that. And now here you are. Strange. This is all she left you?”

“Yup.”

“Well, it must relate to you in some way. If it does, only you’ll be able to solve the mystery I’m afraid. Sorry I can’t be of more help.”

“That’s okay, it was worth a shot.”

“And the second question?”

“Ah, it’s kind of something I don’t get. But I’m hoping I’m just missing something. I’ve been reading about *wards* and stuff and what they can do, and I’m just not sure learning to make *wards* is... well, worth it.”

“Oh? And why do you say that?”

“Do you have some time? There’s a lot of reasons.”

“This should be good. Please, go on!”

“I only had a chance to read the beginning of this,” I said, reaching for the book I had earlier taken from the library, “but it’s relevant. Let’s see here.” I paged through the beginning. “Here we are. Says here the first *artificer* was also a *seer*, and actually divined the runes we today write on paper to turn them into *wards*, possibly through dream interpretation.”

“That’s correct. You’ve only been here a day and you’re already researching the history of your power? I’m... impressed.”

“Thanks. The point is, what he dreamed was the ‘pure essence’ he called it, of the warding discipline. In other words, the closer you come to duplicating the exact pattern as he saw it, the more effective your *ward* is

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going to be. For the life of me I can't imagine why. Does the pattern of ink bend space-time in some way, creating a stronger affect? It doesn't seem logical it happens at all."

"Also keep in mind that you don't have to use paper, as long as you envision the symbology as you construct the object." He paused. "You know, your first exam isn't until a month from now, and I'm not the one you have to impress."

"But this is important—" I started to say, but I saw he was smiling, so I went on. "Anyway, what I'm saying is, you can make a *ward* but totally mess it up in some way, but not so much that it's obvious. Then right when you need it the most, it lets you down. Isn't it better to spend that time making a *talisman* that can be tested and worked with beforehand? I would rather have something that was less powerful, but that I knew the full capabilities of, than three things, one of which might not work at all."

"As you practice making the symbols on the paper, you'll begin to recognize which ones look more perfect than others. But I agree, that is a valid point."

"Okay, what about the paper then?"

"What about it?"

"Does it become special in any way? Or does it just remain paper with an affect programmed into it?"

"Anyone can use a *ward*, if that's what you're asking."

"No, I'm saying that anyone can *tear paper*."

"Oh, I see what you mean. Yes, it just stays paper."

"So to be effective, I have to carry around a sheaf of paper, not the most durable of substances, that can be lost, dropped, torn, or stolen and used against me, as you say; anyone can use *wards*."

"You could put the sigils on stone or something more permanent."

"And carry around a bag of rocks? That's even worse! How would I ever find the one I wanted?"

"That's a fair point, actually. I myself used to string beads to make small jewelry charms. However, carrying around more than two in a pocket made them hopelessly tangle up and it was impossible to quickly find the one I wanted. So I went back to just paper. Also the cost of the supplies was getting out of hand... anyway, what about thin sheets of metal? I've thought about that myself a time or two."

"I could buy that. But that brings up another good point. Say I have fifteen *wards* in my pack, right, and there's some demon after me. Doesn't matter why, we'll say he is."

“Okay, for the sake of argument, there’s a demon.”

“First, if he has a buddy, any *ward* I throw at one is just going to get torn off by the other one.”

“There is one way to get around that, but go on.”

“Second, I’m on the run from this demon or demons, I need an exploding *ward* or whatever, right? Okay, pick out the one you want while running top speed for your life. Easy, right?”

“I’ve never been in that situation.”

“Or even worse,” I went on, “I throw a healing *ward* by accident because I got them mixed up in my haste. Whoops! I can see the bead thing being extremely bad for that!”

“I could see that happening, I guess. As for the first, I knew a warder that put the sigils on bullets.”

“That would prevent them from easily being removed, I guess. If they didn’t just blow through whatever was being shot at. But come on, wouldn’t this person always have the wrong bullet loaded?”

“I never asked, actually.”

“Humm, bullets, I’ll have to think about that. What’s the policy for firearms on campus?”

“Prohibited.”

“Super,” I said, nodding. “Maybe when I’m 21 then. Now reverse it.”

“Reverse... bullets?”

“No, no, I’m not being chased, my best friend lies dying after we’ve fought off the demon. Quick, I need to save her life! I grab what I think is the healing *ward* I made two days ago but, uh-oh, it’s the cutting *ward* instead and I just finished her off. That would be horrible!”

“You’ve really thought this through, haven’t you?”

“This is just what I thought of in like an hour. Am I wrong about all this? Is there something I’m missing? Am I blowing it all out of proportion?”

“It’s not a question of right and wrong. I admit, the focus has always been on *wards* first, then *talismans*, but given the points you’ve raised, I wonder if maybe we’ve been too traditional in that sense.”

“Are they that much harder? I mean, take the light *ward*. Is it worth learning to make a piece of paper that can light up by tediously drawing the same shape over and over again until you get it right? You could spend that time just making a ring that glows, or just *use your phone*. I mean, unless you learn how to make all of them, and carry at least one, you’re never going to have the one you want close at hand, right? That’s just how the universe works.”

## DUE PROCESS

He laughed. "It does seem that way, at times, doesn't it?"

"I don't deny there are some I'd like to learn, and being able to just scrawl some shapes on a paper and have it do "magic" would be very handy. Especially if you need to hand out a bunch to others, but come on! Even making a couple, if you want to do it properly, is going to take an hour. That's not cost-effective, unless you spend every waking minute doing it."

"And there is your unique situation to consider," he said, almost to himself. "You'll be able to do a lot of things just on your own. *Wards* are really a way for *artificers* to 'keep up' with the abilities that others have."

"I wasn't even thinking that, you're right."

"So, are there any other concerns about *wards* that you would like to talk about?"

"That's all I've been able to think of, for now."

"And when it comes down to it, what you're saying to me is, you'd like to focus on *talismans* rather than *wards* in your ability focused studies class?"

"If that's possible."

He settled back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. "Your guardian, he's a watch maker, isn't he? And a *touched*?"

"Well, yes sir, he is, though I only learned about him having powers recently. He wouldn't tell me exactly what they are," I answered, wondering what this had to do with anything.

"I guess that's where this need to make things comes from? And I suppose it's better to have you excited and willing to learn rather than sullen and spending every minute wishing you were doing something else. And quite honestly, if you can pick up *talisman* making, learning those couple of *wards* you say interest you to round out your abilities would probably be easy. Yes, I wonder."

"It isn't any more dangerous, is it?"

"What?" he said, obviously lost in thought. "Dangerous? No, no, they won't explode or anything if you mess them up, they just won't work. I mean you can mess them up and get something we consider cursed, but as long as you take the time there's no danger of that. But the proper focus, something to really- I've got it!" He jumped up out of the chair and went into the other room, picking up the phone and dialing it on the way.

"Mandara? Great. Can you find Albert and tell him to come to my office? And tell him to bring the sword- the dangerous one. Thanks."

He rubbed his hands together and looked through the books on his shelf. "Ah, here we are!" he said, visibly pleased.

“There’s someone I want you to meet,” he said, striding back into the room. “He’s a third year now, very dedicated *alchemist*, likes turning himself into a dragon, man, thing. You’ll like him. Always messing about with *bloodiron*, and possibly researching gold he can bring between dimensions. Haven’t caught him actually making any though. That’s good. Anyway, got a sword last year from a friend of his, nasty business, maybe he’ll tell you about it. Anyway, the previous owner gave it to him so he could work with an *artificer* and maybe duplicate it. He won’t be able to do anything, of course he’s just an *alchemist*, so we’ll see if he’ll lend it to you, and you can look it over. See if you can reverse engineer it, you know? He can tell you the whole story. Here.” He slid the rather large book over to me.

“Very old, treat it with respect, but it’s the premier book on *talisman* making. Oh, there are newer techniques of course, but the principles detailed in this book are the very foundation of what you’ll need to do. Take a year! Maybe even into the summer if he doesn’t miss it, you’ll have to see what he says. The person that made the sword was old. Very old. So these techniques are closest to what she herself would have used, so you’re in good hands. Of course it’s in some ancient language but the text has been translated by various people over the years, and of course the diagrams need no translation, so you should be fine.”

I was amazed at how animated he had suddenly become. I guess he was pretty passionate about his field. Maybe I made an impression on him or something?

“Have a look! You can borrow it until you’ve worked it out, of course. It’ll be a couple of minutes before Albert gets here. Unless he flies up, which I wouldn’t put past him! Haahahah.”

He went chuckling off into his office and started writing stuff, probably doing last-minute schedule things, or making my schedule? I reverently opened the book and started skimming. Most of what it said I already knew, at least the theory of what it was describing. Making a *talisman*, it seemed, was a highly personalized ritual unique to each *artificer*. This made it hard to pass specific knowledge of how to make something down in books, so they tried to be as general as possible. All while providing enough detail that an *artificer* with a different style could follow it. So, my first couple of classes would probably be just finding my specific style. There weren’t too many ways to do it, and the teachers were no doubt very good at figuring out what would work for certain people. After all they had many years of practice.

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Some things were constant though: they all took hours to make, and could be made permanent or activated with the user's own *spirit energy*. Energy-based *talismans* were much easier to make, and making them only usable by *artificers* could make it even easier. They could do multiple things, but adding in more than one power became increasingly difficult. It was both a matter of precision, getting the power into the object properly, and balance, making the various powers co-exist inside. A very powerful *talisman*, therefore, could be worked on for hundreds of hours, if you weren't willing to chance the process not working and having to start over. You could do a sloppy job and hope it was good enough, or take the perfectionist route, put the hours in tweaking everything to be just right, and not waste the effort. Good thing I was a patient person!

Looking at the index, this book spent as many chapters detailing how to figure out someone else's method from an object as it did on how to translate that method into your own personal one. I couldn't wait to get started. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long- an older boy carrying two swords came into the office. One was pretty normal looking, the other-

“It really was a chainsaw sword!”

**Weapons of Personal Destruction**

*It's not a light saber, but... wait, you could make a light saber?*

The boy poked his head around the corner after hearing me speak. “Hello,” he said, in what sounded like a Russian accent. He turned to the principal. “You wanted to see me, sir? You said bring ‘the dangerous one’ but both my swords are pretty dangerous, so I wasn’t sure which one you meant.”

“Quite all right. There’s someone I’d like you to meet. Albert, this is Dean. Dean, Albert.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “I thought I got a glimpse of that sword earlier, it’s cool to see it close up. Isn’t it too big for you though?”

“Not when I’m in my fighting form it isn’t. Wait, if this is about the sword, that means-”

“That’s right, this is who I’d like you to work with, or at the very least give access to, the sword. For this school year or until he figures out how Charna made it.”

“Isn’t he a bit young for the job? Meaning no disrespect to him or your choice. I mean, I’m pretty good at alchemy for how old I am, but that was because of the technique Asteraceae used on me, a very special case. Unless he went through something similar, which I doubt and wouldn’t recommend, can he be that good?”

“I admit, he’s a first year student, but I believe he has the drive and the special talents needed to properly do the job. He’s a descendent of one progenitor or another, most likely Cain. If you don’t know about that, he can fill you in later.” Albert nodded, understanding. “Also he has his own reasons for becoming the best *artificer* he possibly can, so this will be an excellent test of his abilities. Unravel this sword,” he said, taking it from

## DUE PROCESS

Albert and tapping it, “and you’re on your way to becoming one of the best *artificers* of all time.”

“I’ll definitely do my best!”

“I know you will. Good luck.”

“Does he understand what it can do?”

“You’ll have to fill him in on the details later, Albert. I think he can be trusted with it, so you don’t have to watch his every move or anything. And so few people know about it anyway, I don’t think it’ll be a problem. I’ll add your name to the list of people permitted weapons on campus, so the prefects don’t give you a hard time about it. Don’t go waving it about, of course. It’s the supernatural equivalent of a small bomb I’m giving you here- sorry, Albert is loaning you here- so don’t screw it up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent. Now, I have some work to do finalizing someone’s schedule, so get out of here, the both of you. See you around!”

I accepted the sword from DeLefeu and hooked it to my belt loop, feeling the unfamiliar weight on my hip and thinking I was going to have to learn to walk with this thing without it crashing into stuff. I grabbed up the smaller book and the tome on *talismans*, and nodded to Albert that I was ready. We both started out of the office but Mr DeLefeu called out “Oh, and Dean- I don’t want your grades to suffer because of this, do we understand each other? Only good reports from your teachers now.”

“I won’t let you down.”

He nodded and we closed the door behind us. I was almost walking on air (who needed special boots?) with how well that had all gone. I still couldn’t believe it. I said as much to Albert.

“Strange,” he replied. “Usually it’s the opposite reaction coming out of that office.”

“I can believe that. You don’t mind loaning me this, do you? I mean, he sort of took it away from you without your saying yes or no.”

“No, well, yes, but I guess not. I don’t know. Hopefully with all that Charna business behind us, and the Foundation getting new members, things will become ‘abnormal’ around here. That is to say, quiet, for a change. And I admit the sword is useful, but I lived without it this long. I only got it at the end of last year, so I can live without it a while longer.” He shrugged.

“What does it actually do? Mr. DeLefeu said it was the equivalent of a small bomb, so it can’t be just a sword, right? It’s that dangerous?”

"In the right hands, yes. It's not much more than a sharp stick for you, until I show you how to use it."

"So it's a *talisman*?"

"I'd rather be away from people when we discuss it."

"Oh, right. Listen to me going on about it. There was no one in the library before the assembly, and that's where I said I would meet my... well, friends, I guess. One friend and two roommates, anyway."

"You have two roommates?"

"No, I mean my friend's roommate and mine."

"Oh, I see. We can go there, that's fine."

So we made our way back to the library. "By the way, who's this Charna he was talking about?"

"Oh, just a baddy we faced in the past. One of the original humans, so she could learn all powers, just like you?" I nodded. "She could master them though, and master them she did. Alchemy, *talisman* making, magic, energy blasts, she could do the works. She was thousands of years old and wanted to destroy... everything. We stopped her."

"Oh, is that all?"

"Yeah, it didn't take long."

Somehow I believed there was more to the story than that. Still, we entered the library and again, no one was there but the kid behind the desk.

"Back so soon? I thought I told you not to leave the girl- whoa. You didn't have all that stuff when you came last time!" He whistled as he looked at the sword and book I was carrying.

"Special mission from the president," I said, bumping one finger against the side of my nose. "Very hush, hush."

He looked at me very funny. "Sure, whatever you say. Albert," he said, nodding to Albert, who followed me in.

"Hello," Albert replied, nodding back.

"Got that gold thing worked out yet?"

"You know that's a theoretical exercise only."

"Yeah, that and my love life. Just don't forget your friends when you crack it, okay?"

"No, I won't forget my friends," Albert replied a little sadly. "Come on, let's go in back."

I followed him into the stacks of books, to a table in the back of the library where we both sat down.

"Mr. DeLefeu said something about you and gold, what's that all about?"

## DUE PROCESS

“Oh, it’s a big no-no to make gold. I did once though, but found out later that the one reason it’s so highly sought after is because crossing real gold into the Demon World leaves you with real gold. Taking gold made with *transmutation* between dimensions leaves you with a weird looking rock. I still feel bad about that, I never got around to telling the dragon I gave it to. Something about the purity of the substance, I guess.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I’ve got some if you want to look at it. I made the gold in the Demon World so the Foundation *seers* wouldn’t know about it. We needed some money in a hurry, you see. But when I brought back the extra: rock city. Hard to test different theories without easy access to the Demon World, so I have a bunch of things I want to try the next time I go there. Only making gold is actually punishable, thinking about making gold- is not. They would have to round up and execute every *alchemist* ever born if that was the case!” We both laughed. “I hope to write a paper about it one day: ‘The Observed Elastic Properties of Transmuted Substances When Crossing Dimensional Barriers.’”

“That’s a fine point.”

“Yes it is.”

“So,” I said, lowering my voice, “do you think you’ll do it?”

“Hard to say. Like I said, the people I hung out with last year all graduated, and they had various ways to get to the Demon World. With them gone, my hands-on research is totally stopped. I may already know how to do it, but I don’t know I know, if you get my meaning.”

“I think I do. I’ll have to see what I can do. Maybe I can make you something to cross over, just to aid in purely scientific research, of course.”

“Of course. Oddly enough the ability to go to the Demon World came in a lot more useful than you might think these past few years. More than I ever thought, anyway.”

“I’ll have to look into it sometime. Now, to the business at hand. This sword- what’s the big deal?”

“It’s a copy of Tyrfing, the sword shoved in Fenrir’s mouth for quite some time. A *summoner* I knew managed to get ahold of it, if you can believe it. He then spent half his time afterwards trying to get rid of it, then get back again. He could just not make up his mind about it. Long story short, the blade was very powerful, and Charna, who wanted to wipe out all the All-Father’s creations, kind of stole it from him in order to help with that goal. We didn’t realize it because she gave us this fake, which she said she had ‘dampened down’ so it wouldn’t be so easy to notice. We believed

her, but later learned it was a separate sword entirely.”

“You mean blow up Heaven? Earth? Why?”

“Long story. Very long. Maybe I’ll draw a webcomic about it someday. Anyway, the sword has a couple of things it can do.” He looked around. “Okay, go ahead and draw it. I would say you should probably study it down in the room that’s warded, but you can’t go down there every time you want to pull it out, so I guess it’s okay. Maybe you can make yourself something that will be a portable anti-scrying device? Anyway, no one will be looking for it so it should be fine. Just don’t pull it out to show everyone, okay? You’ll understand why when I’m done explaining it.”

“Got it. What happened to the original, anyway?”

Albert looked uncomfortable. “It’s been sealed away, out of reach from those who would use it to help them summon Fenrir. I can’t say more.”

“Oh, okay, I don’t mean to pry.”

I gently slid the blade out of the sheath and took a look. It seemed like a normal broadsword, though much lighter than I would have expected, given the size. I hefted it.

“Is it made of aluminum? It actually seemed heavier a minute ago. Oh, it just has a really heavy scabbard, right?”

“No, that’s its first property, actually, bestowing a greater strength on the wielder for lifting the sword or attacking with it. Now, stand right here and I’ll show you the second property.”

I did, and Albert stood in front of me. I held the sword off to the side, not wanting to stick him by accident, and he put his palm up in an “are you ready?” sort of gesture. I was, so I indicated he should get on with it and that’s when he kicked me, hard as he could, between the legs.

“What did you do that for?!” I half shouted, and stopped. It hadn’t actually hurt at all. In fact, he was hopping a little bit. What the-?

“The second ability the sword gives you is to be *invulnerable*.” He saw my face begin to light up and hurried on. “It’s not as great as you think. Sure, you can take an entire army of human soldiers and bombs and tanks and nukes right now, but one demon can still mess you up pretty bad. Heck, me getting in a solid hit with *my* sword would still kill you pretty much dead. So don’t depend on it. Anything supernatural, like energy blasts, demon’s claws, *wards*, they’ll still badly hurt you, okay? You’ll learn all this in your classes, of course, but you need to know the powers and limitations if you’re going to carry this around.”

## DUE PROCESS

I nodded. This was impressive so far, even with the caveats.

“Now the third thing.”

“There’s more?”

“A little more,” he said, amused. “Why do you think he always wanted it back so bad after he spent all kinda time hiding it away?”

“I guess so.”

“Close your eyes. You don’t have any training in this yet, but it radiates enough power that maybe you can get a sense of it. Just, I don’t know how to explain it, just clear your mind and focus on what you feel from the sword.”

“I’ll give it a try.”

I closed my eyes and tried to do what he said. I thought I may have felt a little something, but it was impossible to say if I really felt something or if I just wanted to think I felt something. I opened my eyes again. “I’m not sure.”

“There’s a whole class dedicated to this, so don’t worry about it. I haven’t taken it myself, it’s an elective, so maybe I’m explaining it wrong. But it’s what my friends do when they want to feel something out.”

“It’s what my foster father did when I showed him the egg!”

“Okay. Anyway, the sword makes this next job easier, so accept for the moment that it is radiating power. That’s the biggest drawback with it, by the way, and why we have to be so careful with it. Anyone who does know how to use spirit sense gets an immediate feeling of power any time the sword is around. The original was even worse, I guess: demons were especially attracted to it. For the moment, just imagine lines of force are coming out of it, and draw those lines into yourself. It might take some effort, they don’t bend easily.”

“Uh, okay,” I said, unsure. I looked at the sword and clenched my fist around it, willing the power of the blade into myself. Suddenly, it did just that! I felt power wash over me and I almost dropped the sword in my surprise, but managed to hold onto it, though I lost the power from the blade. “That actually worked, just for a second! I really felt it!”

“That’s pretty good for a guy with no training. Try it again.”

I did, but nothing happened.

“Ah, beginner’s luck. Well, the last thing is the sheath. It actually cancels out the power somehow, so it can’t be sensed anymore, so you don’t have to worry about it drawing attention when it’s put away.”

“That’s good. This is some *talisman* he wants me to study.”

"I hope you're up to it."

"I have a feeling I'm going to have to be. Thanks Albert, you've been great about this."

"Eh, I learned from the best. And like I say, my friends all graduated, so I hope to make some new ones this year."

"Well I think you have," I said, sticking out my hand after sheathing the sword again. "I hope I can call on you when I start learning some alchemy, maybe you can give me some pointers."

"You got it."

"Let me guess, he's talking about *talismans* again," someone said from behind a bookshelf, and Yasui stepped into sight.

"Hey, there you are! Albert, this is Yasui of the Heavy Boots, which I see she is still wearing. Yasui, this is the Golden Alchemist, Albert."

They both did the normal "nice to meet you" bit. "Now," said Yasui, "that's quite the sword you have there Dean, or are you just happy to see me?"

"I am happy to see you, but the sword is a project I've been given to work on by the principal."

"Wow, hasn't been here twenty-four hours and already the poor guy has homework? What kind of school is this?"

"I think he asked for it," remarked Albert.

"I did, that I did," I agreed. "It's my punishment for thinking *wards* are a bit useless, and wanting to study how to make *talismans* as soon as possible." Of course my mother's gift had something to do with my eagerness, but that wasn't the only reason.

"So you got a really powerful sword to play with?"

"I'll have to swear you to secrecy."

She made a cross over her chest with a finger. "Cross my heart."

"How much did you hear, exactly?"

"Just the end part about the energy. I know a little about that. When I force spirit energy into the boots the effect is doubled, so it took me awhile to get the hang of jumping and running in them, because any extra effort I put in gets magnified. But it does tire me out, so having a sword I could pull energy from would be really, really nice."

"Yes," I said slowly, "I can see some possibilities there." I looked around. "Hey, where are Osman and Christina? They aren't with you?"

"Christina went to practice archery someplace because she's a total snob that doesn't know the value of friendship. Osman went to the bathroom. He'll be here shortly."

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In fact, another voice came ghosting through the books, “Is someone taking my name in the vain?”

I introduced Albert to my roommate, and swore him (and his sister) to secrecy as well.

“Anyone else you’re going to tell about this?” Albert asked with mock resignation.

“The only people I know are the ones you see right here!” I protested.

“Oh, right. Well, I guess your roommate will see you working on it all the time anyway, so he would have to know.”

“And I trust Yasui, she’s not a blabber mouth.” I fake whispered to her, “You’re not a blabber mouth, are you?” She shook her head with a smile. I turned back to Albert. “See, told you.”

“Well, on your head be it.”

“Wait a second, is that a chainsaw sword?” said Osman.

“Oh, yeah, I made it late last year. It’s powered by an ability of mine to make objects move on their own. Before I had just used it for moving rocks around to check for traps, but then I got the bright idea that it could make something spin, as well. I was thinking of making a machine to generate electricity, remind me to show you the basement sometime, but then I thought about circular saws. It wasn’t long after that this chainsaw idea popped into my head. I formed the blade with *transmogrification*, then put some *Quintessential Unquent* in the track to make it frictionless. I then just give it a little spin and tell it to move, and it spins very fast for a couple of minutes. I usually *transmogrify* myself into a large, stronger, dragon-man sort of creature to use it, as it tends to get away from me when I’m like this.”

“Still, that’s pretty incredible, how you put something like that together. There are some *talismans* that can only be used by *artificers*; well, here’s one that can only be used by *alchemists*. Pretty sweet.”

They all nodded appreciatively and looked the blade over.

“Could I make one of these? I mean, I doubt I could make the whole blade part just by wishing it like you did, it seems pretty large and heavy. But if you made me a copy of this one, could I animate the chain part? That’s pretty light.”

“Well, the amount of time and the weight you can affect depend on your skill with the power, so you might be able to keep it going for a minute or so.”

“Wait a second, I think I saw something...” I opened the smaller book, the one I had taken out, to the index. “Yeah, yeah, here. There’s a way I can make a *talisman* that stores a power from someone else. So actually I could turn the chain into a *talisman* that held your power of animation, and just activate it when I needed it. I couldn’t transform like you can, so mine would have to be smaller, but that could totally work.”

“Wow, my boots seem less impressive all the time.” Yasui seemed a bit down, with all this talk, and who could blame her? Still, it wasn’t like an ancient *talisman*, any ancient *talisman*, wasn’t impressive in its own right.

“Hey, your boots are cool,” I protested. “It’s just, this is an actual *chainsaw sword*.”

“I know... I know.”

“What’s the chainsaw part made of? You said it could still hurt me even holding the fake Tyrfing?”

“You mean Tyrfake?” asked Yasui.

“What?”

“It needs a better name than ‘the fake Tyrfing’ doesn’t it?”

Albert and I looked at each other.

“Tyrfake it is,” I agreed. “You were saying?”

“I was saying *bloodiron*. It’s mined in the Demon World, and it’s an invulnerable metal, so good luck working with it without invulnerable fire and invulnerable hammers. Or, not to brag, *transmogrification*. Oh, and it doesn’t rust, it bleeds. And it’s pretty heavy, just like regular iron. I made a breastplate and a helmet out of some I got, and I have to keep it clean or it’ll make a huge mess. But it’s worth it.”

“I should say. Wow, alchemy is fantastic. I really want to learn the basics right away, I’m glad I put it at the top of my list. I had no idea it could be so cool.”

“You have no idea. I’ll be happy to help in any way I can, just let me know.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me. If you can spare a little chip of that bloodiron I really want to study that right away too. There’s so much I want to learn, it’s crazy!”

“I’ve got a couple of kilograms of it. You can have a little, it’s fine. And I know where to get more, though getting back there now is a real problem. Hummm, have to see what I can do about that. Anyway, not your problem.”

“Thanks!”

## DUE PROCESS

“You know,” said Yasui, “I bet you’re going to meet a lot of people here. Think about it. If you can really learn the basics of everybody’s skills, you’ll attend their classes for at least a little while. More than that, you’ll always have something to talk about with people- ‘can you give me some tips for doing X.’ Am I right? You did it just now with Albert, got him talking about his sword and got some ideas for cool things to do, right? And with you being able to combine powers all on your own, why, there’s no limit to the things you could accomplish!”

“No pressure,” I said.

“She has a point,” Osman said. The others nodded.

“Today has just been so amazing, you know? I was worried I wouldn’t fit in at all, but then I met all of you, and the principal, and got this sword. If anything else good happens I’m going to think it’s a dream and get really worried.”

“It was the same for me,” Yasui admitted. “I thought clunking around in these boots would get me a lot of funny looks, but I’ve seen people carrying way weirder stuff than that, like chainsaw swords, so no-one even looks at me twice.”

“Same with me,” echoed Osman. “I thought when people heard about my sister or saw my eyes they would hate me, but you’ve been really nice about it.”

“So Albert, are we all just lucky or is this par for the course here at the magical land of Demongate High?”

“A lot of good things have happened to me here. A lot of bad things too, though. You’ll find it balances out, in the end.”

“I hope not,” I said, appalled. “If something bad has to happen to me to offset all the good stuff that happened in the last twenty-four hours, I’ll wind up dead. Or worse- expelled.”

“You need to sort out your priorities,” said Yasui, doing a passible impression. “Now, are we going to sit in this stuffy old library the rest of the afternoon, or are we going out to do something?”

“I really wanted to get started on studying this...” I trailed off, as Yasui gave me a dirty look. “But then, there’s time enough tonight to do that work stuff, right?”

She smiled. “That’s the spirit.”

“Did you have something in mind?”

“I’m glad you asked. We have a unique opportunity here. Hey Albert, you can change us into other things temporarily, right? I mean if you can become a dragon-man...”

“Yes,” he said slowly.

“So let’s go swimming!”

“Uh, what?”

“I don’t know, will not everyone wanting to be swimming today?” asked Osman.

“And where do I fit in there?” asked Albert. “I’ve started taking swimming lessons after an unfortunate loss-of-power incident that caused me some grief in the water, but I’m still not great at it.”

“That’s the beauty of it! Can’t you turn us into mer-people?”

“Oh, I see. Well, I can turn you into a creature with a tail, but I can’t give you the ability to breathe water. The best I can do is give you actual gills. And technically we’re not supposed to use our powers without supervision.”

“Has that stopped you before?”

“I was just pointing it out.”

*So that’s how my first full day here went, I wrote in the email to my father late that night.*

*We went swimming, and Albert was kind enough to help me hide the sword by making a hole in the wall and then closing it up again until we were ready to go. Watching the wall just peel back because he willed it was so cool. He turned Yasui and me into mer-people and we had fun having underwater races and just swimming around, doing tricks for the “air breathers.”*

*Osman and Albert just sort of splashed around in the shallow end, the cowards. We met up with Christina for dinner, and ribbed her a little for missing out on the fun. She didn’t say anything about the sword. Then I said goodnight to the others, went back to my room, drew the sword, and opened the book to see what I could learn from it.*

*There’s just so much I want to learn, I can’t want to get started. Too bad I still have to take math classes and English and all that other stuff... for reasons, I guess? Oh, well. I’ve made some friends, something I wasn’t even sure was possible, but unlike my last school, I actually feel like I fit in here. There’s way freakier people here than me, so I guess it’s a matter of degree. Tomorrow is Sunday so I’ll probably spend at least some of it reading, there’s a lot of material to get through. Then we start classes on Monday, which I can’t wait for, unlike starting at my last school. Anyway, don’t worry about me, I’m doing fine, and going to bed, it’s been a long day! Write you later!*

**Making Copies**

*Learning can be enjoyable for it's own sake. Learning to throw energy blasts and the like is enjoyable for quite a different reason.*

The first three weeks of school passed with a great deal of swiftness. It's amazing what having a clear goal to work toward and the drive to succeed will do to you. Having finished looking through the book I had originally taken out, I had taken to just skimming other texts on *talisman* making. I figured that just having an overview in my head on what certain books talked about would be useful in the long run. I also picked up the basics of everything there was to know about alchemy, the energy manipulation stuff that *spirit energists* could do, and I was working on learning the mental disciplines for some *ESPer* skills. Oh, and I'd called out my *spirit projection* a couple of times, who turned out to be a beaver looking creature, mirroring my drive to be a hard worker. Some things just couldn't be anything else when you see them, you know?

I had also discovered my personal method of making *talismans*, which was much like how other *artificers* made *wards*. I would set what I wanted to become the *talisman* on special paper, created to help the flow of *spirit energy* into the object. I would then surround the object by a complex series of symbols linked together by a spiral, all which represented the power the object was going to "absorb." The ink was also specially prepared to absorb *spirit energy* and direct it towards the object, so I was glad to have Donald's gift money so I could buy these supplies down in Porta. When the symbols were in place and checked, I would put my power into the start of the spiral and it would flow through them all and up into the thing I was working on. If the symbols were correct and the path whole, the item became a *talisman* and sucked them all in, activating it. If not they

burned away and the whole thing had to be started over. Of course, to add a second power I would start over with a fresh sheet, this time modifying the symbols to coexist with the ones already in the object, making it that much harder.

It was now Saturday night, about 8:30, and all the first year students like me were looking forward to Monday, when we took a week off of classes to go on a field trip to Japan. Well, most everybody, that is.

“Japan’s not so great,” said Yasui, kicking her feet back and forth as she sat on my bed. She wasn’t wearing her boots, so she was enjoying her unburdened state. I wouldn’t have admitted it to her, but I was as well. She did have nice legs, probably muscle tone from wearing those boots all the time. “I’m not sure why everyone’s all excited about going there. I just left there, I don’t want to go back already.”

“But have you actually seen these temples we are going to visit?” asked Osman, moving his sister’s bishop up three squares. It was weird to watch him play “himself” at chess, but it was one thing his sister could do easily, by just telling him what pieces to move. They were pretty evenly matched, which I supposed figured, with them sharing a brain and everything. “My question is, why do we have to fly there at all? Can’t we just *teleport* directly? Okay, there’s maybe two hundred first year students, so it would take a while, but not as long as flying us all out there. Plus the fuel cost, meals, paying the pilot, it’s stupid!”

“I can see one reason,” I replied, turning around from the *talisman* sheet I was working on. “They want us to get experience moving about airports and traveling like normal people. We won’t always have personal *ES-Per* services to whisk us from place to place, right?”

Everyone nodded at me.

“To answer your question, Osman, I haven’t seen these exact temples, but if you’ve seen one temple, you’ve seen them all.”

*I’ve never even seen one*, thought Kat in our minds. We all looked up.

“Did we all hear that? Hey, you’re getting better at *sending* to more than one person at a time, Kat! Nice,” said Yasui.

Suddenly, a vague form appeared in front of Osman, and she bowed. *Thanks*, I heard her say. *I guess I have a reason to practice it, now*. Listening to her this way took a bit of concentration, as she sounded very far away, but she was there, and visible. A little too visible, she didn’t project with anything resembling clothes- after all, she was just a soul, so she had never worn anything, ever. It made talking to her like this a challenge. Oddly enough, this was a challenge I felt up to.

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She walked over behind me and looked over my shoulder at the diagram I was working on.

*That's looking pretty complex already,* she remarked.

"Well, if you look closely here and here, you'll see there's a lot of repetition, so that makes it easier. I have to do the same thing in a couple of places because I want it to be four *ley lines* worth of power I can draw out. And there's some other things in there, so, yeah, it's going to be pretty complex when it's done."

*When will that be?*

I sighed. "Probably two weeks from now. I don't want to cart it around Japan, it'll be hard enough keeping track of the sword, though I suppose I could just give it back to Albert. He is trusting me with it, so I figure it's best to keep it with me. Who knows, it could even come in handy."

*You're going to walk around with it?*

"There will be others with *inherited* stuff, like Yasui's boots, no one will remark on it. I got some more unseen *wards* from Mrs Chadwick, as I can't make my own yet." I shook my head. "All those poor suckers learning how to make *wards* while I study the second most powerful sword in the world. Just doesn't seem fair. Unseen *wards* are the same as Yasui had on her boots on the plane over here, so normal people couldn't see them," I said to Osman, who was looking confused.

"Good thing we can now!" Yasui chimed in, jumping off the bed and standing on the other side of me. "Is this an exact copy of what the sword can do?"

"Ha, ha, we have the technology, we can rebuild him to be better, stronger, faster than he ever was before!"

"What?"

"Ahem. No, that would be stupid. I don't need greater strength, I'm not going to be punching people and actually using the sword I'd probably chop my own leg off by accident. Making *spirit manipulation* easier is also well understood, a lot of different symbols for skills have been worked out, so everything from carpentry to fighting skills could be increased with a *talisman*. Making me invulnerable, again, nice, but if it's as easy to bypass as Albert says, I'll work that into something else later, maybe. The only thing not well understood, at least in what I've read, is how this lady put the *ley lines* into the sword so they could be drawn from. That's primarily what I'm working on so in the end, this is going to be way better than the sword was."

*How so?* asked Katrina.

“Well, for one thing I’m putting all this energy goodness into this ring, so it’ll be smaller and easier to carry. Next there’s a second spiral I’m going to put there as well, and that’s the clever bit. Do you want to hear about the clever bit?”

“Yes, please tell us about the clever bit,” Yasui said sarcastically.

“I will. The clever bit is taking what was done to the scabbard and putting that at the end here. All this energy stuff that leaks out of the sword will be nice and contained in the ring- no one doing a *spirit sense* on it or me will be able to tell I’ve got it at all. And that’s the clever bit.”

“I’m impressed,” said Yasui. “All those hours of work are really going to pay off.”

“If I haven’t messed it up, yes. Just to be sure I created a potion of *Ameliorating Medicament* with alchemy to improve my mental facilities. That helped me use the *ESPer* skill I learned last week to do *postcognition* on the blade and see how it was made. Good thing it wasn’t made more than a year ago, or it wouldn’t have worked at all. I’m not that good at either alchemy or *ESPer* skills, but it was enough. Oh, *postcog* lets me see the history of an object, so I could actually see what was done originally to make it. I could have had an actual *ESPer* or *seer* do it, but they wouldn’t know the *artificer* stuff they were looking at, so it had to be me. Anyway, it just barely worked so let’s hope I got it right the first time and I don’t have to do that again.”

*I have to go back*, said Katrina, who could only stay away from Osman’s body like this a few minutes, *but there is one other thing I think you’re overlooking.*

I turned to look at her, “What’s that?” I asked, but she was gone.

*Look in your student handbook*, I heard in my head, *I remember Osman reading it but maybe I’m wrong. The rules part.*

“Uh, the two whole pages of silly rules they have? I mean, ‘Hair should be kept neat and washed.’ Honestly, do they think we’re savages?”

“Probably got on the books two hundred years ago and not taken off,” quipped Osman. “But I wonder what she’s thinking of?”

We got out the packet and looked, she was right, and it was right at the top:

*Watches and one pair of earrings are permissible jewelry.*

“Well, crap.” I said, reading it. “You were right, Kat, it doesn’t say rings are permitted.”

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“But this is a *talisman*, right? So shouldn’t that make a difference?”

“It should, but I bet it won’t. Especially because of the sealing I’m doing on it, it will look and feel like a normal ring. Even getting permission from the principal, people will be complaining all the time that I get to wear a ring, so why can’t they wear one? And proving it’s a *talisman* will give away the secret of the energy boost it provides. Meaning I’ll just be back to square one again, everyone will be trying to steal it from me.”

“Though technically you’re breaking *special abilities may only be used under the supervision of faculty* sitting here doing this, right?”

“Principal DeLefeu charged me with working out this sword himself, and I can’t work it out if I don’t try a bunch of things to duplicate what Charna did, right? Anyway he admitted this wasn’t dangerous, if I got it wrong it just wouldn’t work. I’m just writing on paper, not using powers. My power is to energize the spiral and see if it makes me a *talisman*, which I’ll only do after having Mr Delefeu look it over. If I was showing off my powers in the halls or something, yes, they’d call me on it. Just sitting here in my dorm room, come on! In any case, if that rule was valid, poor Kat here wouldn’t be able to talk to us at all, unless a teacher was present. How messed up would that be?”

“Pretty messed up,” answered Osman.

“Or a *cambion* that can regenerate cuts himself? Oh, better hold off on regenerating that until a teacher shows up! Please! I rest my case.”

“Does it have to be the ring?” asked Yasui, turning back to the diagram. “Can you change the object now that you’ve started it?”

“Oh sure, as long as it fits at the end of the spiral there. If I wanted to make something big I would have to start with a bigger spiral. I guess it’s just a proof of concept anyway, and I can wear it around the dorms, or carry it in my pocket. I just hate the thought of losing it. To say nothing of all the work I’m doing on it if I can’t wear it all the time.”

“It’s no problem, I know what you should do!” Yasui clapped her hands together excitedly.

“Really?”

“Sure, you’re going to be making a bunch of things anyway, right?”

“Probably, I’ve got a lot of ideas for stuff, why?”

“And the form doesn’t matter? Size doesn’t matter?”

“Nope.”

“Then make a charm bracelet, and just make the chain fit around your arm, right here.” She poked me in the upper arm. “Wear it under your clothes and no one will be able to tell it’s there at all. And if no one sees it,

no one will care it's there and you can add a bunch of little 'charms' that do different things."

"Hey," I said, thoughtfully, my eyes widening. "You know, that could actually work. Not on my arm though, I'm thinking on my leg, under my sock. That way it won't even jingle if I run. I can still activate any of them, any time, because they're already touching me. I like it. Thanks a lot Yasui, you're a life saver! And of course you too Kat, for remembering all these stupid rules."

"You're welcome," they both said in their way.

"I'll just turn the *bloodiron* ring I was going to make into the chain so it's nice and unbreakable, and make a charm for each." I sighed, looking at the ring sitting there. "It was hard enough making the ring, this amount of material is about all I can affect, you know."

I picked up the ring from the table and closed my eyes. I knew from experience I had about a thirty percent chance of being able to affect it and turn it from one thing into another. I envisioned the very fine chain I wanted, and put energy into the ring. Nothing happened. Great. I tried again. Success! And after only one attempt, nice.

I opened my hand and there sat a chain hopefully big enough to go around my ankle. I tried it, and it seemed like it was going to be fine. Then I pulled out two nickels, and closed my hand around them. Yasui and Osman crowded around me, interested in what I was going to make next. I closed my eyes and wondered that myself. *I suppose I could pay homage to the thing that made it all possible*, I thought. I picked a tiny representation of the sword and pictured it in my mind. I again put power into my fist and was rewarded with the metal flowing together and becoming something new. I opened my hand again. There, on a tiny chain with a tiny clasp was a tiny sword, almost ready to be used. They applauded.

"Cool." said Osman.

"You're really getting the hang of it." said Yasui.

"I got lucky that time," I replied. "Metal is the hardest thing for me to work on. I can change a whole stack of paper into something else made of paper, but metal? Well, let's just say anything worth more than ten cents probably won't get made."

"Yeah, why use nickels?" asked Yasui, taking the tiny sword from me and looking it over. "Wouldn't turning paper into metal be cheaper?"

"But harder," I replied. "It takes energy to make a change, be it from one material to another or one shape to another. Even if it doesn't work, I have to put that energy into it to try. And as usually I've had to try metal

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stuff more than once, it can wear me out pretty fast. But I know two nickels worth of metal is something I can reasonably work with, it's cheap, and the mass is the same. It's the old joke: what weighs more, a pound of feathers or a pound of lead? I could- well a real *alchemist* I mean, could turn that pound of feathers into lead, but they wouldn't be lead feathers, they would be one lead feather, because it would weigh so much more. So using paper, I'd have to weigh the paper until the weight of paper was the same as I wanted the charm to be. By using something that's already the same weight, I don't have to worry about figuring all that out."

"Oh, simple, when you think about it." Yasui didn't seem convinced, but I pressed on.

"That's right. That's why I'm having Albert get me a bunch of samples of things that do a lot with only a little. Like gunpowder, C4, pure hydrogen, diamonds, you know, the usual. If I can turn a stack of paper into gunpowder, or a soda can's worth of water into pure hydrogen, I could still make some pretty big bangs."

"Or you could work on that chainsaw sword rather than messing around with small piles of gunpowder," said Osman.

"I admit it would be a last resort sort of thing. But it just takes me a few minutes to analyze a material and know it forever, and be able to turn other stuff into it. So why not have that ability rather than not have it? Sure, Albert might be able to turn a door into water to make an impressive entrance. I would have to just carefully cut the hinges apart and kick the thing in, but we would both get the job done."

Osman chuckled, "I guess you're right."

"The detail on this is amazing," said Yasui, handing it back to me. "How do you do it?"

"I just imagine the way I want something to look and the power sort of does the rest. I don't know, it just happens. Like you jumping in your boots. You don't have to think 'jump,' you just jump and away you go."

"These powers are pretty great." she agreed.

"Couldn't have said it better." I wrapped my mind around the charm and used *telekinesis* to lift it out of my hand and into place at the center.

"Okay, now you're just showing off."

I laughed. "Again, I wouldn't be able to lift much more than this with *telekinesis*. To just know that I can have my brain pick something up for me, even something this small, I don't think will ever get old."

We all stood and looked at the spiral I was making, and Osman was looking back and forth at the diagram I had the book open to, and the paper.

“Do you see something wrong?” I asked, concerned. If he was spotting something, it must really be messed up, but then his eyes were better than mine.

“It’s just that, you said your power is to energize spiral and make into *talisman*, yes?”

“That’s right.”

“Why can’t you just design this on computer, print it out, and energize it without all this tedious drawing? Would that be way easier?”

“In part, yes,” I said after a moment of consideration. “Don’t ask me why, but when I asked that in class I was told it had been tried with others who make *talismans* this way. They tried putting the special ink used into an inkjet cartridge and printing it, but it didn’t work. Something about the *artificer* actually putting the symbols down on the paper has... meaning. Same with *wards*, you can’t just hit the print button and photocopy yourself a million *wards*. You could, I suppose, print a *ward* out in say, purple ink, and then fill it in yourself with another color, to make sure you got it all, and then energize it. Just trying to energize it right out of the printer will fail. I wish that idea would work, but no, I asked. What I am going to do is scan it in before I energize it. If it doesn’t work I can just print it, study it for what went wrong, then trace it onto another sheet and make changes to it. So yes, computers can help, but they aren’t *artificers*.”

“Pity.”

“Tell me about it. Designing this on a computer probably would have been easier, if I had those kinds of skills. I really wanted to recreate the feel of Charna’s original work, you know? What was she thinking as she made it? So I watched her for quite awhile as she made it, and she was good, let me tell you. No hesitation at all- I can only hope I become that skilled at this stuff. I don’t know if intent or strokes or all that matters in the end, but somehow it must, given the fact that, like I said, a computer can’t spit out a spiral I can make work. So I’m going to get as close as I can, and hope it’s good enough.”

“You’re really getting into this, aren’t you?”

“I grew up with a watchmaker, so I think a lot of it rubbed off on me. ‘Do it right. Take your time. Feel the watch you’re making take shape.’ He had a million little sayings. When I get home in the summer I want to show him all the cool things I’ve made, so he knows he wasn’t just saying that stuff. It meant something to me. I owe him a lot, and this is one way I can pay him back. And look at this, I can turn symbols on paper into an object of power. Who wouldn’t be totally psyched about that?”

## DUE PROCESS

“A person with no imagination at all,” Yasui replied.

“Exactly.”

“I suppose I should start thinking about getting back. Might want to do a little studying tonight, boys, we do have our first exams after the field trip, and you know how much studying will be done in Japan, don’t you? None.”

“Not true!” I protested. “As I won’t be able to work on this, I’ll probably get more studying done. In fact I’m counting on it.”

“To each their own, I guess. Say, Kat, will you help Osman with exams?”

*I haven’t decided yet. I do have the knowledge the angel gave me before he departed again for the Heavens, but I have to ask myself if the angel would help him. I do try to do what the angel would do, or in the way he would do it.*

“Come on Kat, you can help him out, what’s the harm? It’s just tests.”

*Do you know, the angel of seeing Osman would have received had he been born on a Monday rather than a Thursday as he was, wouldn’t actually tell him something it saw if it felt not doing so would be an appropriate test for Osman?*

“I’m sorry, but the Heavens are messed up. No disrespect intended, Osman, but that’s just cruel.”

*We aren’t supposed to be a crutch for our charges, just there to protect and guide them.*

“Well, I guess you have to do what you think is right. Just remember, you aren’t an angel, so they’re not expecting you to totally act like one. I suppose Osman could *petition* an angel and ask them directly what you should do.”

“Yes I could, if I could *petition* anything bigger than a phoenix right now.”

“You can call on a phoenix? Oh, I so want to see one!” said Yasui.

“They are not to be called lightly, you know.”

“I wasn’t suggesting you should. I just said I wanted to see one.”

“Ah, thank you for clarifying,” he said with a chuckle. “They are a sight to behold.”

“Pity I’ll never ask the Heaven’s help like that. Heavenly creatures are just too powerful for me to handle.” I said to Yasui, who looked like she was going to ask why. “Best I’ll ever be able to manage to pull across dimensions is a small demon or two, not that I have any intention of learning *summoning* for quite a while.”

“Good. Demons are not to be taken lightly, even the little ones.”

“Well, I’m talking about ones that just follow orders, like that sheet one, what’s it called?”

“I have no idea,” lied Osman with difficulty. He knew very well from his sister that the only demons that could be referred to as “that sheet one” were called ittan-momen. He didn’t want to encourage Dean in his misguided pursuit of *summoning* them.

“Anyway, that’s an easy one to *summon* that just wraps things up. I read about it when trying to decide if I should take a *summoning* class one week, but I decided it could wait. It can’t even talk, so it doesn’t make demands or anything.”

Osman still looked skeptical. “I’d still rather deal with Heaven.”

“Hey, me too, but I can’t do what I can’t do, you know?” I said, holding my hands up in surrender.

“You can do enough, I am thinking. Leave something for the rest of us.”

We all laughed.

“See you all tomorrow,” Yasui said as she left, skipping out the door.

**Darkness Surrounds**

*Have you seen a Japanese game show?*

The last days of September dawned cool as about a hundred sleepy first years, myself included, made their way to the front of the school. There, two busses waited to take us to Porta where we would board the plane for Japan. Christina was with us, for once, but standing off to one side as though not wanting to associate with us too closely. I noticed no one said hello to her, even follow *spirit energists*, which made me a little sad. Still, as Yasui said, she only had herself to blame. It was early morning, and my breath made little clouds in front of me as I looked around. It had only been three weeks, but what a chance had come over all of us. No more scared little kids, glancing around as though monsters could pop out of anywhere. We were confident, relaxed, and excited about the trip.

I was sorry to leave my research, but determined to make the best of it. The fake Tyrfing was resting against my left hip, and I had my left hand on the hilt to steady it.

“Why must we be getting up so early?” Osman complained, rubbing his eyes.

“You can sleep on the plane,” I said, grinning at him. “We’re going to Japan, doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Yeah, a long flight that I could be avoided.” He yawned. “I mean, I could avoid. Whatever.”

“My, we’re chipper this morning,” remarked Yasui.

“He’s like this every morning, pay him no mind.”

“Alright,” a loud voice from behind us yelled, “everybody on the bus, we’re ready to leave.”

We looked, it was Mr Foxtail, the *cambion* with nine large fox tails trailing behind him.

*Where does that guy buy pants, anyway?* I thought as we filed past him.

We climbed into the bus, I sat with Osman while Yasui and Christina sat in front of us. Yasui was kneeling on her seat, looking back at us and chatting until the driver yelled at her to turn around, and we were off.

Osman cocked his head in that way he did when he was listening to his sister.

“What’s up?” I asked him. “Is she telling you what you forgot to pack or something?”

“No, she is very upset, actually. She’s not focusing properly, that’s why she’s not talking to all of us, I can barely understand her. She says something is wrong.”

I looked around, and everything seemed normal. I shrugged, reaching out with my limited ESP sense, but of course I wasn’t very good at it, so I didn’t pick up anything. I had to laugh, some *artificer* I was, three weeks at school and I hadn’t made a single thing. I couldn’t even make one *ward*! Oh well, who else could do alchemy, energy blasts and ESP stuff as badly as I could? “I don’t sense anything,” I said at last, “Not that I really expect to unless it’s already right on top of me.”

“She says it’s getting closer, whatever it-”

He didn’t get to finish, because in the blink of an eye, darkness surrounded the bus and we were thrown forward in our seats as though it had come to a complete, instant, stop. Which it didn’t take long to discover: it had.

“Ow,” I said, picking myself up off the seat and checking myself for injuries. I felt pretty banged up, but otherwise okay. “Is everyone okay?” I shouted.

“I’m fine,” said Osman, who I heard moving next to me.

“I’m okay,” said Yasui, “But I think Christina’s hurt.”

“It’s my knee, I really banged it when we stopped. What happened, anyway? I can’t see anything either, but my eyes feel okay.”

“It’s total darkness for me too, something happened. Anyone else hurt?”

I waited for a response, but didn’t hear anything- no wind, no sound of waves from the coast, nothing.

“Spooky,” said Osman.

“Well, I guess Kat was right,” said Yasui. “Anyone have any way of making light?”

## DUE PROCESS

“Oh sure, now the light *ward* would come in handy,” I muttered. “Someone just try their phone.”

“My cell phone doesn't seem to be working,” said Osman. “You think I wouldn't?”

Suddenly, a pale blue energy field surrounded us, throwing at least some light on our situation. Quickly looking around I saw everyone else on the bus seemed to be frozen in place, as though for them, time had stopped. I stood and looked over the seat. Yasui was looking concerned at Christina, who was looking rather pale and holding her knee.

“I don't think I'll be able to walk for a while, but I can at least do this,” she said, trying to hide how much pain she was in.

“Don't worry,” I said, “I'll have you fixed up in no time.” *I hope*, I silently added.

“You know a healing skill too?” Yasui said, sounding impressed.

“No, but my *shaman spirit projection* does. Just a second while I call it out. I haven't actually gotten to call him out for something useful yet, so this will be nice.”

I concentrated, carefully gathering the energy I needed to create my beaver, and pictured him coming out of me to help us. *We need you*, I silently pleaded, and was rewarded with a feeling of greater mental clarity as he appeared before me. “Yes, it worked!”

“And what, exactly, is that?” Christina said through clenched teeth, still holding her knee.

“*Shaman* can call on spirits of nature to help them,” I explained. “They can also project a part of their soul, which takes on the form of an animal, to help protect them in a fight. This is part of my soul which takes on the form of a beaver to help me out. He has his own abilities apart from me, which I don't quite understand, but whatever. He gives me certain things too, like greater insight and better manipulation with my hands. Anyway, I'll have him heal you right away.”

The beaver nodded and advanced on Christina, who pulled away a little but didn't otherwise move.

“Oh, wait!” I said, my clearer thinking already helping me out. I drew the fake Tyrfing and concentrated on it. Now this I was getting better at, and of course the sword itself helped me, so I easily bent the power lines radiating from the blade into myself. “Okay, go ahead,” I said needlessly, as my spirit projection didn't need to hear what I wanted it to do, it was my soul. It already knew. Anyway, it touched Christina's leg and I fed it power from the sword, so it easily healed her and she visibly relaxed.

“Thanks,” she said grudgingly. “There is a healing technique I can learn, but it’s pretty advanced, so it’ll be a while before I can even attempt it.” She flexed her knee, “It feels perfectly fine now, amazing. Thanks,” she said a little more genuinely.

“No problem,” I answered.

In the meantime, Osman was out feeling around the outside of the bus, and was now pulling bags out of the storage area in back, looking for his. He found it a moment later and came back, clicking a flashlight on. The barrier Christina was maintaining vanished as we had light now.

“Okay, now we can figure out what’s going on,” said Yasui. “Because this is just too creepy.”

“It’s going to get worse,” said Osman. “Wait until you go outside. But first things first, while I was looking I had talks with Kat. She doesn’t know any more about this place than we do, she just had vague feeling of impending danger after we got on bus. As to why we’re still moving and they not...” he cast a sidelong glance at the other kids on the bus. “She says the moment the darkness hit her, she instinctively try to counter it, and did, well, she’s not sure, that protect the four of us. But she says that be normal for *ESPers*, half the time they just need something to happen and it does, then they later work out how to do it more. That’s how she learned all her powers up to this point, anyway. Could also have something to do with her substitute angel status, but she’s not sure. It’s thanks to her we’re still moving so let’s not waste the opportunity. We don’t know if what she’s done will wear off.”

Everyone thanked Kat, even Christina, however sullenly. “So what’s it like out there?” asked Yasui.

“I think you better see for yourself.” replied Osman. “Prepare for weird factor one thousand.”

We all looked around, making sure everyone was indeed frozen here, and got off the bus. Lucky for us we could open the door, it didn’t seem like objects were affected by whatever was keeping everyone else from moving. Dropped things still fell, but we could not interact at all with the other kids there. We stepped off the bus and looked around, where Osman was pointing and shining the light. “This way,” he said, and started off.

“Wait, let’s all get lights. There should be more in the bags.”

“You want to go through other people’s stuff?” sneered Christina.

“You want to stumble along with only one light?” Yasui shot back.

“I- Fine. It’s a good thing *they* work, why don’t our phones?”

## DUE PROCESS

We pawed through the bags we found on the bus and got out lights.

“Let’s go,” said Osman, but I said “Wait!” again. They turned to look at me.

“We have to put these bags back. Once we figure out how to get out of here, the bus will start moving again, and these bags might start moving too. They’ll all go flying if we just leave them out here. Or if we do figure out how to get out of here and the bus goes but not the bags, they’ll be lost!” No one could think of any argument, so we threw them all back in and shut the door. We all stayed pretty close together, with Yasui hanging onto my left arm and my beaver close to my right as we walked past the bus, following Osman. Christina took up the rear, looking around nervously. After only a few seconds another bus came into view, which we stared at, eyes wide.

“I think you mean weird factor nine thousand,” said Yasui, holding me a little tighter.

“No, it’s still only two thousand. Come on, I have theory to test.”

“You don’t mean-” Yasui started to say, but closed her mouth with a snap. Another bus came into view, then another one after that. These weren’t modern, air conditioned, anti-lock brakes, diesel driven monsters of today either, they were old. Each one older than the last, and the last looking more like a “newfangled horseless carriage” than a school bus. It even had wooden benches.

“I thought I saw three more, but I couldn’t be sure. I’m afraid I was right.”

“I think it’s over nine thousand now.” I said dryly. “Shall we check it out?”

The others nodded.

“Should we send your beaver? It might be safer,” suggested Yasui.

“No can do,” I replied, shaking my head. “I’m not a *shaman*, and the distance my *spirit projection* can go from me depends on how good I am at making it come out. And as I can only be crappy at that, well, I’ll show you.” I stopped walking, and my beaver made a right turn and took a couple of steps, then seemed like he was straining to go further, then turned around and shrugged at us, slapping his tail on the ground. “That’s the limit,” I said. “So where he goes, I must follow. Strike that. Reverse it.”

“These things are ancient,” said Christina, “what are they all doing here?”

“I guess that’s for us to find out,” I replied. “So, shall we just work our way back?”

The others nodded, and we climbed aboard the ancient looking machine and looked around. There were kids onboard, just like on our bus. Only about two dozen, and wearing old style clothes as well.

“Take a look at this,” said Osman, peering at one. “He is reading newspaper, and according to that, year today is 1921.” We crowded around looking at it. “Apparently,” he read, “Margaret Gorman, a 16 year old from Washington, D.C. just won the first Miss America contest. And here’s an article about, get this, bootlegging. Not software- booze.” None of us laughed. “Let’s keep looking.”

We did, and just like on our bus, everyone seemed to have just been living their lives, heading from the school to what must have been at that time the newly constructed city of Porta. All except one person, that Christina noticed.

“Hey, look at this guy,” she said, and Osman swung the light over to who she was looking at. “Does he seem strange to you?”

“He does,” I answered after a moment. We all stared at him, trying to figure it out. Unlike the others he was frozen not talking or looking at the scenery but with his arms over his head like he was afraid the “bus” was crashing into something.

“He saw it coming,” said Yasui quietly. “There’s no other reason for him to be like this- no one is hitting him, or throwing something at him, right?”

We looked about. “Unless someone’s using a mental power or something on him and not looking at him, no,” said Yasui.

“Hey Kat, are you getting anything off these people?” I asked Osman.

*No, it’s like they’re not even there. I’m not getting much of anything from this place. Sorry.*

“Not even danger?”

*No, not even that. So I guess that’s a bit of good news.*

“I’ll take what I can get. Keep trying, you never know what you’re going to sense.”

“Let’s check the others,” said Christina, “see if they each have someone like this.” We nodded, it was a good idea. As good as any in this place.

The other busses did indeed have one person that seemed out of place, like at the last second they had seen something the others hadn’t. The badges they were wearing were all different too, so there was no common power shared between them that would explain why only one person per bus had any warning.

## DUE PROCESS

“Would Kat have looked like this poor girl?” Yasui asked quietly, looking at the third person we had seen like that.

“I don’t think it,” said Osman. “Look at patch, she is no *ESPer*.”

*And other ESPers were caught in this trap, if that’s what it is, so why did I feel it and they didn’t?*

“Maybe because it’s a non-physical thing, and you’re more attuned to that kind of stuff?”

*Because of my nature, yes, that could be the case.*

We checked our bus too, and yes, there was a boy, a *cambion* with armor plating on one side of his body, that was not like everyone else.

“Well, one per bus,” noted Christina, “So if the pattern holds, it wouldn’t have been Kat at all. She would have been frozen like the rest of them.”

We all looked at each other. “So now what?” asked Yasui. “There’s a common thread between each bus, but it’s happened four times in the last hundred years, how does that help us get out?”

*If it really is a trap, someone hasn’t been cleaning it out properly.*

“I’m no rat to chase after cheese!” said Christina, “let us out of here!” she shouted at the ceiling. Nothing happened.

“It’s forgotten, if it was a trap.” I said. “Whoever set it up must be long gone or dead or something. After all, 1921?”

“Wait a second, cheese!” said Yasui excitedly. “That’s what we’re missing!”

“You’re hungry now?” said Christina, scowling.

“No, no, I mean for the trap. If this is a trap, and not some way to protect something! Think about it, the rat goes for the cheese because the cheese is desirable to him, right? So where’s the thing we’re supposed to be taking to spring the trap? I bet if we find that, we could find the way out. After all, the person or persons that set this up had to get out, right?”

“Somewhere in the darkness,” said Osman. “Even I can’t see in the dark. That’s why I can’t see inside drawers or boxes, they have to have some light hitting them.”

“Then I guess it’s my turn to shine,” stated Christina. She looked up at the ceiling, then walked over to the emergency exit she saw there. We looked at her funny as she jumped up unto a seat and opened it. “Don’t just stand there, come on!” she said. We followed her up onto the roof of the bus, where she was taking a chain bracelet with a cross at the bottom out of her skirt pocket. She clipped it on her left wrist and shook it down, then made a fist and held it out to her side. She concentrated, and a bow made of

light sprang from the cross into her hand. She made a pulling motion, and an arrow made of light appeared.

“Cool,” Yasui and I said together.

“Just tell me where you want me to fire, and when,” said Christina to Osman.

“How many can you make?” he said, concerned, and looking around.

“We only need the light, so I’m just putting the smallest amount of energy possible into these arrows, so I’m good for at least 60.”

*If she’s learned how to pull energy out of things, she can pull some from the sword, I thought, but let’s leave that as a last resort, as she doesn’t know about it yet.*

“Ready,” said Osman, “Shoot in the direction you’re pointing right now.”

The arrows didn’t cast much light, but apparently was good enough, as after only a couple Osman shouted “There, there’s something there all right! Aim just a little more to the right, a little more, there!”

She let it fly and we all watched as it disappeared into the distance. The other arrows seemed to go on forever, at least Osman with his superior vision said even he lost track of them after a few seconds. This time he said: “It hit something, some kind of structure is out there. We can go check it out!”

“Seems as good a plan as any,” said Christina, opening her hand and letting the bow go back into the cross. “Let’s go.”

We climbed down into the bus again and made our way in that direction as best we could. We were relying on Osman to guide us, and I was certain he wouldn’t let us down. I grabbed some paper though, just in case, and started tearing off little sections and dropping them as we walked, just so we could find our way back if we needed to. I noticed there was a slight mist on the ground when I shined my light on it, but it didn’t obscure the paper much. At least until we got much closer, when we noticed the mist getting thicker.

“Are we up to ten thousand yet?” asked Yasui.

“I’ll let you know.” I answered.

“Hey, could you do that bow thing?” she asked quietly.

“That’s her manifestation, I guess. Real *spirit energists* manifest a sort of energy weapon like a sword, or spear, or a bow. But that’s inherent to being a *spirit energist*, something they don’t have to practice and get better at doing. I’ve learned to throw an energy blast like an energist, but I can’t do the manifesting thing. My beaver here is the best I can do in that

## DUE PROCESS

regard.” We both looked at him and he waved his little paw at us, and Yasui smiled and waved back. “Until I unlock the *energist* nature inside me, the best I could do is maybe a *talisman* that did something similar.”

“Would you?”

“Make the *talisman* or become a true *spirit energist*?”

“Become a *spirit energist*.”

“I don’t know, it takes a lot of work to unlock a nature from what I understand, and honestly, alchemy seems more useful. Say, that reminds me! Wait up, everybody.” They all stopped, and I bent down and put my hand into the mist. I focused on it with my *analysis* skill for about a minute, then stood up again. “Just seems to be regular old water.” I said, shrugging.

“I could have told you that,” said Christina.

“No, you could have guessed that. I just analyzed its molecular structure, and it’s water.”

“If you say so,” she replied, not sounding convinced.

“Anyway,” I went on, walking alongside Yasui again, “with how hard it is, and how many ways a soul can channel power, I’d have to be very sure I wanted to put the effort into unlocking a certain power and the related skills before I did it. And right now I don’t know enough about what I’ll want to do most, so I’ll hold off and just learn bits and pieces until I can make a better decision.”

By this time we had made it to the structure, which turned out to be a tall stone block, probably about twice as tall as myself and maybe three long steps to a side. At first glance it was featureless, but looking closely at it we noticed a small hole on one side and a rectangular block slightly inset next to it. We all stood facing it.

“So, what, it’s a door?” asked Christina, annoyed.

“What do you see, Osman?” I asked.

He looked at it, then took a step closer and moved his head around.

“Nothing, it must be dark inside.”

*I can go look for you,* thought Katrina, who then paused. *Oh, wait, I guess I need light to see by too, as odd as that sounds. I’m not sure I’m good enough to project and use ESP to get a sense of what’s in there. I could try if you wanted.*

“Is it some kind of tomb?” asked Yasui.

“There could be anything inside there. Who can say.” I replied.

“Can you use your alchemy skills on it?”

“On something that huge? No way. I could tell you if it was really

stone or not, and I could shoot an energy blast at it, but otherwise, there's nothing I can do to open that door."

"I could try to kick it down," offered Yasui.

"I could get it open," said Christina, jangling her cross.

"No, the explosion might hurt whatever's inside. Same with kicking it, the door could fall in and crush something we need from in there. No, there's got to be a way to open this door, and this tiny slot must have something to do with it. Osman, can you look down it while I shine the light inside?"

He agreed, and I put the flashlight up to the hole while he concentrated.

"There are some symbols down the length of the tube," he said. "But I don't think I can describe them for you."

"Are they written on paper?"

"No, they run whole length of tube."

"I see. I suppose they could be a *ward* of some kind, but why put it in there, and how? You say it's a tube, how wide is it?"

"Uh, well, about as wide as a sword."

"Ah. Well, great, you probably need some kind of rod with the special symbols needed on it to unlock the door, this is just a really fancy key-hole!"

"So we're stuck?" asked Yasui.

"Well, I can slot the sword in there and see what happens, but if it's a key that's needed, you can forget it."

*This place is protecting something, I can feel that now that we're right up close to it, Kat thought silently to us. Protecting, and waiting, like it doesn't want to be opened but will let us in if we sacrifice something. Something equal in power to what it's guarding. I've never gotten so clear a read off a place, so take that as you will.*

"Whatever is beyond this door is the equal to this sword?" I didn't like the sound of that. "And I'm going to have to leave the sword stuck here if we want to proceed?"

*As far as I can tell.*

"Well, nothing else for it then. Wish me luck. And you all better back off in case something bad happens."

"Wait, I can help," protested Christina, "I can make a *barrier* again, right here, and you can just poke the sword through it and shove it into the slot. It's not very strong, I've only had three weeks to practice, but it's better than nothing."

## DUE PROCESS

“Hey, that’s a great idea, thanks Christina.”

“Oh, um, sure.” she replied, as if she wasn’t used to being thanked. *Wonder what her story is*, I thought. No time to worry about it, a blue sphere of energy crackled to life and I braced myself, then thrust the sword forward and into the slot. Of course I missed, because I had closed my eyes, so I had to try again. No-one laughed, for which I was grateful. The sword slid in easily and without a sound, the door disappeared, revealing a set of plain, stone stairs leading down.

“How anti-climatic,” Osman remarked.

*One challenge completed*, I thought, *what’s the next one going to be?*

**Trapped**

*“Despite all my rage I am still just a rat in a cage” — Smashing Pumpkins*

We stuck our heads into the stone structure and looked around, and the only feature was the stairs leading down. I tried pulling the sword out as the barrier vanished, but it was indeed stuck fast into the slot. We looked at each other and wordlessly started down them, knowing there was no other way now but to press forward. However, as soon as we were all on the stairs, we suddenly found ourselves in what can only be described as a throne room!

“What the heck?” shrieked Yasui, giving a jump and spinning around. “Where are the stairs? We were on stairs, right? What’s going on?”

“Take it easy,” I said, grabbing her hands. “It just wanted to go up to 12,000 for a little while, see how that was, it’s nothing to worry about.”

She gave a little laugh. “Okay, okay, sorry. I’m... I’m sorry.” She pulled away from me and turned her back, looking down. I dropped the empty sword sheath and spun her around again, grabbing her shoulders.

“It’s okay, Yasui, we’re all scared, we all don’t know what’s going on, we just have to stick together and get through this. We’re making progress, right? We found a stairway, now we’re in this room for some reason. But we’re going to keep moving and get through this, okay?” I noticed she was crying, but wasn’t sure what to do.

“I’m just so useless,” she finally said. “All of you have done stuff and helped and kept your cool but look at me! Some martial artist I am, going to pieces like this, and what can I do here, huh? Nothing. Everything I can do is useless compared to you guys. I’m useless. I should just go home and forget the whole powers thing.”

## DUE PROCESS

“Why don’t you guys take a look around, we’re going to rest for a minute,” I said to the others. “Come on, let’s go sit down.” I steered her to a corner of the room and she noisily collapsed, so I kneeled down next to her.

“Now come on, you don’t mean that, leaving, do you? We’ve only just started learning our powers, you can’t back out now.”

“Why not? What good is what I can do? What good are these?” she gestured to the boots. “Stupid. Heavy. I should just leave them here, I hate them.”

My beaver (I really had to name or find out his name) came over and bent down to her. “And what do you want?” she snarled. He gestured to his knee, then Yasui’s chest, then shook his head slowly. “What’s he saying?” she asked me.

“He’s saying he wants to heal your heart like he healed Christina’s knee, but he knows he can’t.”

“That’s stupid. Wait a second, he’s your soul, isn’t he? That means—oh.”

“I don’t know how to help you, Yasui. I wish I did. You have to walk the path you’ve been given just like I do, even though neither of us knows where it will lead. In this empty place is there a lot you can do? Maybe not. But I promise, first living thing I see around here, I’ll let you beat them up, okay?”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Of course I am. I’m your friend, and I hate to see you like this, especially talking about giving up. Now I haven’t studied any *true martial artist* techniques, but I’m sure there’s plenty of cool things you can do when there’s people around to beat up. I mean, if this place was crawling with demons or something it would be the Yasui show, and we’d all be backing you up. In that case I’d be the useless one, because I can’t affect anything living with any of my skills, only tiny things. My beaver can fight, a little, but not as well as you could. Right now we need a variety of skills to see us through, but that doesn’t mean we don’t need you in top form in case something does jump out at us.

“So please, give your powers a chance and see how they develop, okay? I’m going to be the best *talisman* maker there ever was—period. Well, learn to use your boots better than anyone in history. Be the fastest person alive, or the toughest, or able to take ten opponents at once. They’ll augment your own powers, so don’t give up on them, either. Okay?”

She sniffled, but I noticed she wasn’t crying anymore. “Okay. You’re a good friend, you know that.”

“I do now.”

“Fine, let’s just get out of here and go to stupid old Japan and I’ll show you around or something.”

“Deal,” I said, getting up. I held out my hand and she took it, and I helped haul her to her feet again. “Now let’s go see what they’ve found.”

“I’ll look over here,” she said, so I let her go, figuring she wanted a minute to compose herself again. A form flickered into existence beside me, and I jumped, but then realized it was just Kat.

*That was a very nice thing you did just now, she said softly.*

“I guess you were watching that, huh?”

*Just in case you messed it up and needed me to jump in. I understand emotion and spirit way better than most, being mostly emotion and spirit myself. Like I know you were lying just then, weren’t you?*

“What are you talking about?”

*Your beaver is probably much better at attacking than she is right now, though she can learn more sophisticated techniques later on.*

“I would have to see both of us in combat to know for sure, and I’ve never seen her fight, so I don’t know.”

*But you believe that’s the case?*

“Well, he’s way better than I am at both *elemental attack* and *barrier*, but that seems to be all he can do. So yeah, he can blast stuff like a champ. I don’t know if that makes him better than Yasui or not. No, I was lying about not knowing much about *true martial artist* techniques, I looked into it a little. Oh, they can be great fighters, the best, next to *spirit hunters*, but there’s so much they have to learn to get there! It takes 10 years of dedicated study, not 4 years of doing a little while you study math and read stupid books to write book reports. Without the kind of drive I have for *talismans*, I don’t know, her powers may not be worth it. How many demons can you beat up in one day? She and Christina, they’re just destructive forces, and what’ll that do to them? I admit I’m worried about her, I can only hope she starts seriously training, not to beat things up, but as a pure discipline. Like how people do weird math problems for no reason. Just to see how far she can go, and take joy in that.”

*At least you’re worried for the right reason, she thought, fading away again.*

*Time to start working on the next piece of the puzzle, I thought to myself. I strode back to the center of the room and looked around. “So what have you got for me, minions?” I demanded.*

## DUE PROCESS

Christina snorted. "If we're minions, you're the king, and the king is dead."

"Long live the king?"

"If you want to take the crown, be my guest." She gestured off to her left, and I looked past her.

The room itself was rectangular, with 6 stone columns evenly spaced to the left and right sides of the red carpet that ran the length. There were five stairs, which led to a dais upon which there was a throne. I hadn't realized it before, but there were torches everywhere so the whole room was nicely lit, and everyone had turned off their flashlights. On the left wall there were three tapestries running the length of the wall, from the ceiling to the floor, seemingly nailed in place. The first was a picture of Mary holding the baby Jesus. Next was Moses, delivering the stone tablets with the ten commandments (what ever happened to those, anyway?) and the third was Noah, leading animals into an ark.

Across from them, on the right wall, were scenes of violence. Demons tearing people apart with their claws, men in armor hacking each other apart on a battlefield, a man stabbing another through the back with a sword. Very detailed. I walked to the throne and saw a skeleton holding a scepter sitting upon it. A crown hung loosely around his neck, and bits of jewelry and fine cloth lay scattered about him.

"I see what you mean," I said. "Anything else interesting?"

"The walls seem to be solid stone, as I can't 'analyze their molecular structure' like some people, so I have to guess what they're made of."

"I deserved that."

"Yes you did, but as I see you calmed Yasui down, I'll let it pass, for now. The throne is unadorned, there are no switches or levers behind it. We are, in fact, totally sealed in. Kat can't sense anything out of the ordinary, and the tapestries are oil paint on cloth, nailed to the wall very securely. That's about what we found. Any plans?"

"Excellent, minion, you have done well. Yes, well indeed. My plan is to leave this room at once and return to my journey towards the land of the rising sun. I leave the accomplishing of this task in your capable hands."

"In other words you have no more idea than I do?"

"That- is correct."

"Can you put that beaver away, he's freaking me out."

"No can do- I mean, sure, I could, that's not a problem. But he doesn't take energy to maintain, only to call out. So if I need him again I'd rather he be right there, and anyway, I only have like a 30% chance of succeeding at trying to call him out, so I'd rather not risk it."

"Fine, fine. Whatever, just find us a way out of this room. I'm not crazy about being shut in here."

"Did you check the chair? Maybe there's a trapdoor underneath it or something?"

"We tried to move it, but couldn't. It's like the legs have been flowed into the stone of the floor. It isn't nailed down, but it isn't sitting on the floor either. Look for yourself, you'll see."

I nodded. "There must be something. Let's keep looking."

So we looked. We rolled the carpet up to look for doors under that. Yasui jumped up and grabbed high torches, seeing if one was a lever. Nothing. We regrouped.

"We're missing something." I announced. "There must be a clue here, and we're missing it."

"So un-miss it," said Christina, "and get us out of here."

"All in good time, my minion."

"And stop calling me that."

"Touchy, touchy. Let's go over the steps again. We found ourselves here. We found a building. We found stairs. We went down the stairs but found ourselves here. There's a purpose to this, I know there is. We were put in this room for a reason. Otherwise we would have just been left outside to rot. So what's in this room? I want a complete list. Osman!"

"Well, the carpet. Torches. Columns. Throne. Scepter. Jewelry. Bones. Wall hangings. Uhhh."

"Stairs?" asked Yasui.

"What's through these walls? Did you look, Osman?"

"Blackness."

"Super. Someone grab me that scepter."

"You do it," said Christina. "I'm not going near the dead guy."

"How do you know it's not a girl?"

"The pelvis doesn't have Mickey ears."

"The pelvis doesn't-" *What in the heck is she talking about?* "Never mind, I'll get it myself." I walked up the stairs to the throne and stood in front of the skeleton, looking the scepter over. It was long, more like a rod, really, stuck through the hand of the skeleton and resting on the floor in front of the throne. My beaver walked around in front of me and carefully pulled it out of the skeleton's hand, which crumbled as it moved.

"Hey, no fair!" said Christina. "You had your soul thing do it."

"Spirit projection, please. And it's still me, so it counts."

## DUE PROCESS

I walked over to the wall and started tapping the scepter along it.

"I can't be sure because this painting thing is in the way, but it sounds more hollow behind this middle one." I moved on, trying the whole room. "Same with this one on this side."

"Okay," said Christina, "stand back!" She manifested her bow again, drew an arrow, paused a second, and fired. The arrow streaked towards the tapestry and... disappeared.

We waited a few seconds.

"Should we have been further back?" I asked.

"You want to try it, smart guy?"

"I guess I well," I said, stepping up. I knew my beaver was way better than I was, but the thing I was trying to hit wasn't actually going anywhere. As long as I pointed in that direction, I was probably fine. I fired off a quick blast, and managed to get it roughly in the middle of the tapestry. It too disappeared before doing any damage.

"I think we need to solve the puzzle here, rather than using powers," I said. "Think about it, if this is here to guard something, they wouldn't know who was coming to get it, or what powers they had. So whoever made it must have made it to respond only to solving the puzzle. It's the only explanation."

"Is that even possible?" Osman asked.

"Depending on the effort they wanted to put into it, I suppose anything is," I replied. "We know, or we think that there is a passage behind these center tapestries, how do we reveal it with just the things we found in this room?"

"I think I've got it," said Yasui. "Does this pillar look different to you? Look at the top and the bottom."

We all looked at where she was pointing, and there was a slight difference between the floor of one column and the rest. We looked it over.

"Here!" said Osman, "Right under this torch is hole, I bet scepter go in hole!"

"Another keyhole, huh? Odd symbolism. I'll give it a try," I said, and shoved the end of the scepter/rod into the hole. Nothing happened.

"Now what?" asked Christina.

*Now you spin it*, Kat thought to us.

"She's right, I bet!" said Yasui, now excited. "It's just the right height for adults to push on and make this column spin around. I bet we could do it!"

So my beaver and Osman got on the one side and the others got opposite us, and they pulled, and we pushed, and the column did spin. We gave it a few revolutions until it wouldn't spin anymore and \*clicked\* into place.

"Let's see if that did anything," I said, advancing on the demon tapestry. I poked the scabbard at it, and sure enough, there was a passageway in back of it now.

"Great, let's go," said Christina.

"Wait," said Yasui, "we should check the other side too."

"Why bother?"

"I've just got a funny feeling."

"Oh, are you an *ESPer* now, too? Fine, check the other side."

Oddly, prying some of the nails out of the back of the other tapestry, as Osman insisted it not be harmed, revealed a second passage.

"So which do we take?" I asked.

"They probably both lead to the same place, right?"

"Well," said Osman, "if I can go through a gate with holy symbolism rather than demonic, I'm taking it."

That settled it. We flicked on our flashlights and started into the tunnel. Which led to our finding ourselves on the stairs again.

"Oh, for crying out loud," yelled Christina. "Is this nightmare ever going to be over?"

"Do we turn back now?" I asked. "The entrance is right there."

"No, let's keep going," said Yasui, "There's nothing for us out there."

I looked to the others, who nodded, and we took a couple more steps down the stairs. Again, we found ourselves in a very strange place.

Yasui kept her cool this time, I think in part because she helped solve the first puzzle and in part because she was expecting it. We found ourselves in a large, domed room, the center of which was out of sight of our flashlights. Along the floor was a sort of trench, starting with a depression in the center of the room and running down a corridor, out of sight. We walked the room and it was circular, with no other passageways but the one with the trench.

"Shall we?" asked Osman.

"Nothing else we can do," Yasui replied.

"Let the beaver take point, in case there are any traps."

"Hey, he gets hurt, I get hurt, you know!"

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Not as badly, but still." It was a good idea, so I started down the

## DUE PROCESS

hallway with him in the lead. It ended in another large circular room with a pool in the center of it. “Great, I could use a swim,” I said sarcastically.

Shining our lights down into it didn’t help much, it seemed too deep to see the bottom.

“Hey, I think there’s a rung here,” said Osman, bending down over the pool. He lay down on his stomach and felt around the edge. “Yes, is cut into the stone, there is step or rung going down into water.”

“Great, so one of us is going to have to swim down, in the dark, and see what’s under the water? Where’s that *alchemist* buddy of yours when you need him?”

“Could you do it?” Yasui asked me.

“Change a *person*? No way. Sorry. No, just like the last one, we’ve been given the tools we need to succeed here, we just haven’t found them yet.”

“I’m willing to go down and see, I just need to take my boots off.”

“No, I’ll go,” said Christina. “Worse comes to worst I can get my bow out, that sheds some light. You guys turn around.”

“Oh, come on,” I protested. “We see Kat naked all the time, it’s no big deal.”

“No, we should respect her wishes,” said Osman.

“Spoilsport *petitioner*,” I muttered, turning around. We heard Christina pulling off her shirt. “I bet you can see her right now, can’t you?” I whispered, leaning towards Osman.

“No, I can’t see behind me, only in front of me.”

“Uh huh. I believe you.”

I heard a splash, and Yasui called “She’s in.”

We waited what seemed like minutes, holding our breath along with Christina, when we heard her pop up again and breathe. We all sighed in relief.

“I swam around, this stuff isn’t water, you know. It looks like water, but it’s not. I was able to swim way easier than normal through it, whatever it is.”

“Your hair isn’t wet!” exclaimed Yasui. “How funny is that.”

She reached up to touch it. “I guess you’re right. Throw me my flashlight, I’ll bet it’ll work ‘underwater’ in that case. Be right back.”

She dove under again, staying down longer this time, then returned.

“There’s some kind of plug on the bottom of this pool,” she said, catching her breath.

“Can I turn around now?” I asked.

“No,” both girls said.

“Fine. What do you mean plug? Like an electric plug?”

“No, like an old style bathtub drain plug. It even has a chain and everything. But I can’t lift it myself, I’ll need help. So get those boots off and come help me.”

“Are you nuts, you’ll get sucked down!” I said, as I heard Yasui’s boots coming off.

“Leave those on, they won’t get wet. And no, I don’t think we will, like I said, it isn’t water. Normally I would float up while swimming, but in this stuff, I don’t. I just sort of hang there. But I can still move perfectly fine when I want to, it’s the strangest thing.”

“You know if we can’t watch you we can’t help you if you get into trouble.”

“We’ll be careful. There must be a reason to drain this pool, so let’s do it.”

“Good luck,” said Osman.

I heard both girls take deep breaths and then there was a splash, and they were gone. I shook my head. “I don’t like this.”

“Aren’t you forgetting someone?”

“Kat! Oh, duh. Sorry Kat, I did totally forget you.”

“She’s gone to watch the girls, actually. So we can help if we need to.”

“That’s a relief. Christina’s really gotten into this, hasn’t she?”

“Maybe she’s afraid of enclosed places? Wants to get out of here as quickly as possible?”

“I guess. At least she isn’t ignoring us anymore.”

We waited some more and suddenly we heard a noise from down the corridor, back the way we came.

“Crap, what was that?” I asked, nervous.

“Can’t tell, you want to go check it out?”

“You’ve got to stay here in case the girls need immediate assistance. I’ve got my *projection* ready, I should be able to handle anything, I hope. Be right back.”

I half ran down the passageway ready for anything. Almost anything. Water was now pouring from the ceiling of this room, and into the hole in the center of the floor. As I stared at it, the hole filled up with water and started along the trench down to the pool at the other end. I stared at the column of water and the trench a moment, then shook my head and started

## DUE PROCESS

back. Along the way I put my hand in the trench and though it felt like a liquid to me, my hand came out dry. “Too weird,” I remarked to myself.

The girls were hanging on the edge, as I walked back, and they both pointed to the spot where I was before. I went and turned my back again as Christina got dressed, and then looked at what they had brought up.

“It’s a very large drain stopper all right.” I said. “Does that help us?”

“Not sure,” said Osman. “Pool level is not going down much.”

I explained to everyone what I had seen in the other room.

“And it started when we were under taking the plug out?” asked Yasui.

“Exactly at that time.”

“So, what, there’s a huge thing of water above the other room that reacts to water flowing out of this room? So the water level stays the same? That doesn’t make sense.”

“It does if you twist it up,” I said.

“Now you don’t make sense.” said Christina.

“Think about it. How did we get here? Or into that other room? Whoever made this place can play with space and time like we play with legos. Imagine this room as being above the other one, even though we walked down a straight hallway to get here.”

“You’ve been reading too many Manga or something,” said Yasui, not convinced.

“Doesn’t matter. What’s important is to somehow stop the water from flowing back into the pool long enough for us to see what else is down there.”

“I can tell you one thing, there’s a metal ring right by the bottom of the rungs. We noticed it this time, and tried to get it up, but we can’t get enough leverage on it with the water being there like we could with the plug. That had a long chain so it was easier. To get this open we’ll need the water to be gone.”

“So can plug go into ceiling?” Osman asked, turning it over. “Look, is ring on inside of plug.”

We all examined it, and I stuck the scabbard next to it- clang! “Okay, it’s a magnet,” I said, trying to pull the scabbard back. My beaver came to help, and then everyone was pulling on me, the scabbard, or the plug, and finally it came loose. “A really strong magnet,” I amended, breathing hard.

“I suppose we could swim up the fake water and put it in there?” Christina asked, uncertain.

“I don’t think I can levitate it, just the chain would be too heavy.”

“Wait, even if we do this, won’t the water level only be down a little?” asked Osman.

“No, oddly enough there was a slight gap I felt after we pulled the plug out. Yasui held onto me and I felt around where it was, so I think it’ll hit the plug and spill out someplace else. Maybe along the top of the ceiling in the other room.”

“That was dangerous!”

“I was holding the rungs, it was fine, you had to be there.”

“I guess. Okay, let’s do it.”

“Here, give it to me,” said Yasui.

“You can’t swim up in those boots, weird water or not!”

“Who said anything about swimming?” she asked with a smirk. We walked back to the room and she started pacing it off, then took a running start down the corridor and nearly flew straight up next to the column of water. Throwing the plug into place and landing again with hardly a rattle, she put her arms up like a gymnast.

“Nicely done,” I said, impressed.

“It was a little higher than I thought, I’ve never actually had to jump that high outside of practice. I’m glad it worked.”

And worked it had, for we now heard the water running down the outside of the walls, and it had stopped pouring in. We ran back down the corridor to see the water emptying out of the basin.

“Oh shoot,” I said aloud. “I should have analyzed it first!”

“Too late now,” said Christina. “Let’s get this next door open.”

We all slid or used the rungs to get down to the bottom and took a look at the iron ring the girls had found. We pulled on it and revealed a trapdoor, under which was a ladder. As I expected, after climbing down it we found ourselves just a little further down the stairs.

“Okay, this is getting old,” said Christina. “When I get my hands on who made this place...”

**Breaking Out**

*You've had the power to go home the whole time,  
just click your heels together.*

We found ourselves in a narrow stone corridor, and as we looked, a light flickered on in the distance. It seemed to come from a room off to the right, while the passageway continued.

"This just gets better and better," remarked Christina, eyes darting in every direction. "Where to next, an elevator?"

"Go check out that light," I told the others, "I want to ask Christina something."

They made their way down the passage towards the light while Christina and I hung back.

"What?" she demanded.

"I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Why should you care?"

"For the same reason I gave that pep talk to Yasui earlier." I replied. "If something's going on with you and you're not 100% right now, I think I have the right to know."

"Don't worry," she said, trying to brush past me, "I'll be fine."

I grabbed her wrist. "That's not an answer."

"Let go of me," she said, yanking her arm away. "I said I'll be fine, and that's the end of it, okay?" She walked down the center of the corridor, her head moving back and forth just a little like she was searching for a way out. I couldn't do anything but follow her.

We went right, and saw Osman and Yasui studying a map that was hanging on the wall. There were two torches hugging the wall on either side, that must have somehow lit themselves when we appeared here.

“Come on, a maze?” said Christina, looking at it. “This just isn’t fair.”

“At least they’re giving us the layout beforetime.” Osman said with forced joviality.

“Beforehand,” Christina muttered back.

“What do you make of it?” I asked.

“Is series of traps listed here on side, see symbols? There is spike pit, and there is... dragon? How does dragon fit into tiny passage?”

“Did you have to say tiny passage?” asked Christina.

“Maybe it’s a tiny dragon!”

“This is no time for your jokes.”

“I thought it was funny,” remarked Yasui with a smile.

“Humph.”

“Anyway, do we try to solve it here, and then walk the solution in the maze somehow, or just try the right hand on one wall trick and get through that way?” asked Yasui.

“Depends on if solution avoids traps,” answered Osman.

“Well, we’re here, according to the map, so if we turn this way first-”

“How do we know the map is accurate?” asked Christina.

“Who hangs a fake map in front of their maze?” asked Yasui.

“Who does any of this crap?”

“You have a point, I guess. But let’s assume for the moment this is a maze and it’s accurately represented here. If we can figure out how to walk it, and it doesn’t match up, we’ll see how it diverges and go from there, okay?”

“I guess there’s nothing else we can do.”

“I’m glad we settled that. Dean, you must have a brush and ink, right? Let’s mark the solution to the map and see if it avoids traps or not.”

Everyone turned to me.

“Why would I have ink and a brush?”

“Because... you’re an *artificer*? Who makes *wards*? With a brush and ink? On paper?”

“Except for the fact that this *artificer* doesn’t yet know any *wards*, and probably won’t if he can avoid it?”

“Oh. Really?”

“You have been watching me work every waking minute on that sword, right? Talisman making? I may have mentioned it?”

“Well, yeah, but I thought, in class... you don’t know a single *ward*?”

“Nope!”

“That’s not really something to be proud of,” remarked Christina.

## DUE PROCESS

“And tell me, how many *artificers* do you know that can call out a spirit projection, levitate small objects, shoot energy blasts, look into the recent past of an object, send thoughts like Kat, analyze matter-”

“Okay, okay, we get the point already. You don’t know any *wards*. Fine. Do you have anything to write with?”

I shrugged and looked back at Yasui. “Sorry. If we had some liquid, like water, I could make you some ink but all we have are solids around here, and state change is a little beyond me.”

“We’re going to have to remember all the turns in the maze?” Yasui said, looking at the hanging. “It’s huge!”

“Look around for a stone or something I can put a point on, maybe we can just scratch the path into it. It’s not cloth, it looks like it’s been painted on the wall somehow, so that could work.”

We looked around the little space we were standing in, but apart from the two torches, their metal holders, and the grey stone of the walls, there wasn’t much.

“What is this?” asked Osman, peering intently at something. “Is maybe clue, no?”

He brushed off the wall and showed us certain scratchings that had been made in the stone, which we all crowded around to look at.

Scratched into the stone was a number: 2200112 and a couple of arrows. Next to the 0 was an arrow pointing left. Next to the 1 was an arrow pointing up. Next to the 2 was an arrow pointing right. We all stared at it for a while. Then back at the painting of the maze, and then back again.

“It’s the start of the maze,” exclaimed Yasui. “You have to do it *backwards* because we start at the “top” of the picture but in reality we should flip it over. See?” She pointed to the long white line at the top, that had the slight protrusion. “This is where we are now, this little room here. Take a right at the next intersection, another right, then two lefts, skip the next two turns, then turn right.”

“Okay, so what’s up with the number? Why not just remember “L,” “S” and “R” or something like that?” I asked.

“Which would you remember better, RRLSSL or the number two two zero zero one one two?”

“Well, RRLSSL does kind of roll off the tongue,” said Christina.

“However way you do it, I think someone has either gone through here before us, and that’s who left this, or it was put in the wall as a reminder to who made it. We can use it to more easily remember which way to go!”

*I think the proper term is a mnemonic device*, said Kat silently.

“Sure, sure, the kneemanic or whatever you said.”

So in the end we worked out the path to take and turned it into a number, then each memorized a section of it, and got through the maze. We had to pass through one fake wall and came very close to the flame trap, but we made it through and got onto the stairs again. No one moved.

“Look, the bottom,” Christina said happily. “We’re almost there!”

We all grinned at the thought, and started to move forward again.

“Be ready,” Osman yelled. “There’s still the possibility for one-”

We found ourselves outside, standing in what appeared to be a plowed field, ready for planting.

“More challenge before we- oh. Never mind,” he finished.

“Now why couldn’t all the challenges be outside? This is much nicer,” remarked Christina. I had to agree. The sun was shining, I could hear birds in the distance, and puffy clouds lazily drifted by, high overhead.

“Quite the change from the last places we were taken,” said Osman. “There’s a farm house in that direction, and I think there’s an actual person here, working the field. A woman.”

“Can I beat her up?” Yasui asked excitedly. “You *promised* I could beat up the first living thing we found in this God awful place, and she’s it, right?”

“Let’s make sure she’s alive, first,” I answered. “See what she has to say. Maybe she’s been trapped here because she can’t figure out the puzzle in this region. She could have started off as one of those kids on the bus, you know.”

“Okay, spoil my fun,” said Yasui with a dramatic pout.

*I could check her out for you, if you want*, thought Kat.

“No, that might be taken as cowardice on our part. We’ll all go and meet this person at once, and if she attacks, we’ll attack her back. Yasui, I’ll be... right behind you.”

“My hero,” she said, clapping her hands together.

“Be careful what you wish for, next time.”

We trudged through the rows of soil up towards the farmhouse, and came in view of an ordinary looking farm girl in overalls, no shirt, just overalls, sweating and digging in the ground. To her left was a wheelbarrow full of seed packets, and as we approached we saw she was planting seeds and covering them with a small shovel. Osman leaned over to me and whispered, “Quite the huge tracts of land this lady has.”

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“What?” I asked back, certain he could not be talking about what I thought he was talking about.

“All this land. How so much for one person? Who plowed it? It makes no sense.”

“Oh, yes, I guess you’re right.”

She looked up as we approached. “Well, howdy, y’all! You must be the new farmhands they’ve been promising me. Nice to meet you. Plenty of work to do, grab a shovel from the ‘barrow here and some seeds and get to it! You can get a good couple hours of planting in before it’s time for grub, just plant anything anywhere, we ain’t too fussy about it.”

We all looked at each other in surprise, this was not exactly what we were expecting.

“Who are you, what is this place?” Yasui asked, confused.

“Land sakes, they didn’t tell you who I was? I’ll have to have a talk with those boys later. Name’s Becky Jane, and you must know where you are, Junebug Farms’ field number 6.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Why, planting, as you can see. This some sorta joke? Did those boys put you up to this? They know I’ve been asking for help so they send me some city slickers for a laugh? Wouldn’t put it past them. Anyway, are you going to help or not?”

We looked at each other again, “Give us a second,” said Christina, backing off. Becky gave us a really funny look but shrugged and said “Take your time, field ain’t going nowhere.”

“Do you think it’s some kind of test?” she asked.

“What, to see if we would immediately attack or if we would help her plant?” I answered. “She didn’t even remark on me carrying around an empty scabbard or Yasui’s boots so either she’s thick as a post or illusionary or something.”

“Thick as post?” Osman said, confused.

“Uh, how about dumb as a rock?”

“Oh, American saying.”

“Will you two knock it off? We’re up to like fifteen thousand here, you know?”

We all chuckled. All of us minus Christina, that is, who just rolled her eyes.

“So what do we do?” I asked seriously. “Go along with it for now?”

“I am not... planting,” said Christina indignantly. “I’ll go check out the house or something, see if these “boys” she keeps mentioning are around. Maybe I can get some better answers out of them.”

"I hate to split up," I said, concerned. "But I suppose in one sense we're all still on the stairs and this could all be in our heads. Really it doesn't matter where we go. All right, good luck, just don't go in there shooting."

"I know, I'm not a total idiot." She took off towards the house and we turned back to "Becky."

"Ready to start planting?" she asked, totally ignoring the fact Christina was running off.

"Sure thing," I answered with a smile. "You look like you could use the help."

We walked over to the wheelbarrow and took a look at the seeds that were there.

"Uh," said Yasui. "What's this?" She held up a seed packet, and on the front was labeled Despair.

"Lettuce," answered Becky. "Green leafy thing, goes in salads. Heck, can't have salad without it. Well, you can have macaroni salad, but that's just not the same thing, you know?"

"Lettuce?" Yasui fairly screeched. "Are you nuts? What about this," she said, picking up another packet labeled Mistrust.

"Radish. I know, some don't like them much, but what did you expect? It's a farm, we gotta grow everything, right?"

"And this one?" asked Osman, holding up Hate.

"Carrots. Land sakes it's like you ain't never seen seeds before. Just how deep in the city y'all live, anyway?"

Yasui threw down the seeds. "No, I can't. It's too much. Please, just let us out. We'll leave you alone, never come back, whatever it takes. Just please let us go."

Becky looked us over a moment. Finally she said, "I don't know what crisis forced you to come here to retrieve it, but it's too dangerous. Please, I beg you, destroy it rather than drink it. Solve your problems with your own strength rather than with that... experiment."

As we all started to ask her what she meant, we found ourselves at the bottom of the stairs again, and Christina almost fell the last two or three, but caught herself and straightened up. "What in the world?"

"When we would not plant her seeds she said odd things and here we are," said Osman. "Let us hope that is final test."

"What things? No, don't tell me, I don't want to know. Come on."

We got down the rest of the stairs without incident, and walked into a chamber. I had never really seen an actual, real life "chamber" before, but

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this was no doubt it. In the center a huge pool of green liquid bubbled and hissed. Around the edge the stone was pitted and cracked. Across from us, on a slab, sat a chalice with vapors coming out of it, descending to the floor and making their way to the edges of the room. It was solid gold, and set with gems that seemed to sparkle and glow in the light of our flashlights. To the right, what appeared to be a doorway, at least, it was a glowing rectangle set in the stone.

“Destroy it rather than drink it,” said Yasui. “That’s what she said. This is what this whole place has been protecting, isn’t it?”

“Looks that way,” I said. “Don’t get too close.”

We carefully stepped around the pool and looked at the cup, which stopped misting and seemed to be filled with a clear fluid. It had been a long time since I had anything to drink, and that water seemed cold and refreshing. I took a step.

“No!” shouted Christina, hauling me back. “Don’t look at it. I think it’s alive or something. Can’t you feel it pulling at you?”

I snapped out of it. “Yeah,” I answered shakily. “Thanks. So, what do?”

“The lady said destroy it, I guess that’s what acid is for,” said Osman.

“Then why didn’t the people who made this place do it?”

“Is good question. What did lady say? Something about crisis bringing us here? But coming here was accident, not us wanting to. Also said solve our problems with own strength, does water grant great strength at some cost? Perhaps who made it thought one day there may be need, so built this place in case. But also put traps in case wrong kind of person came to claim.”

“That makes sense. It’s obviously lain dormant for some time, given the age of the busses outside. So everyone forgot about it and it was never claimed. I say we destroy it, hoping that knocks this place out too, as it won’t have anything to guard anymore, right?”

The others thought a second and nodded their heads.

“But who gets close enough to dump in acid?” Osman asked.

“No one,” I answered. “I’m going to try moving it with *telekinesis*. It’s gold I think, so it could be heavy, but it’s pretty small. I’m guessing if I put my maximum effort into it, I can lift it.”

*I can help. I can only lift small things myself, but with both of us it should be enough,* thought Kat.

“You can? That’s great,” I said, looking at Osman. “Straight up, then towards us, then just drop it straight into the acid. I don’t want the water or whatever it is in there spilling.”

*Agreed.*

“On three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

Both our powers lashed out, grabbing the cup and lifting it just enough to get it off the slab and floating towards the acid. The others backed away to the sides as the cup floated by them. The liquid inside seemed to boil and swirl, but as soon as it was over the center of the pit, we let it go and it fell, to be dissolved the instant it hit the green stuff. Immediately the place seemed to grow brighter, as though something making us feel bad was wiped away, and we all grinned at each other.

“Let’s go,” said Christina, walking towards the door. “The sooner I’m out of here the better I’m going to feel.”

“Off to Japan,” said Yasui. “It’s going to look downright cheerful after all this.”

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” asked Osman as we stepped through the door of light.

“The other busses!” we all shouted at once, as once again we were thrown forward in our seats on the bus. There was a screeching as the bus careened to the side, then spun and stopped. “What the heck?” we heard the driver yell, “where did they all come from?”

Picking myself up off the floor I glanced around. It seemed we were back in the real world, and the other busses from the past had joined us. Christina was on the floor again too, holding her knee. “Not again!” she yelled, crying. “Why just me?”

A holy chosen knelt down beside her and asked “May I?” while holding his hands out. She nodded and he laid his hands on her, and she relaxed again.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, “I appreciate it.”

“Did we bring back someone who only looks like Christina?” I asked of no one in particular. Mainly because everyone else was busy looking at the old style busses that had suddenly appeared in the road before ours. I was busy looking at Tyrfake, which it seemed I had back in my possession again.

The doors opened and the principal, Miss Darrington and Mrs Nolan came onboard looking very worried.

“You do exist!” said Mr. DeLefeu, “how could we have forgotten you?”

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Of course, everyone started talking at once, and it took several minutes to get everyone calmed down. Looking outside, almost every teacher in the place was swarming the busses and checking kids over, trying to calm everyone down and get to the bottom of things. Mr. DeLefeu was trying to coordinate everyone while Mr. Gottschalk, another holy chosen, made sure everyone on our bus was all right.

“We’ll need to talk to the principal right away.” I told him when he got to our row.

“Oh, and why’s that?” he asked gruffly.

“We know what’s going on, at least in part. We can help sort this situation out.”

“Really?” He looked at us sideways. “If you say so, but I think he’s going to be pretty busy for a while until things calm down around here. But I’ll tell him.”

He walked back, checking the people sitting behind us, and I looked at my watch.

“It’s been hours.” I remarked.

“I’m hungry.” said Osman.

Eventually the busses headed back to Demongate High so everyone could be accounted for, and checked over for lasting effects. Given most of them were frozen in time or whatever for so many years. We were all told to go back to our rooms for the moment, there would be an announcement when the faculty knew more. The kids from the other busses were herded into the gym and a hoard of teachers followed them. After about an hour and a half Mr. Pearson, a *spirit energist* and gym teacher, came to our room.

“So, the boy who got out of my class somehow knows something about this whole situation, do you?” he asked.

“Myself, Yasui, Osman, Kat, and Christina were all part of it, sir,” I replied.

“Kat? Who- oh, the girl with no body, right, right. Well, principal wants to see you, get going. You lifting weights like you’re supposed to?”

“Actually I’ve been doing a bit of unexpected physical activity just recently,” I answered, scooting past him and down the hall.

“Good,” he yelled after us. “Don’t want you slacking off now!”

“If you only knew.” I muttered to myself. Somehow I got the feeling Kat was laughing silently.

The five of us piled into Mr. DeLefeu’s office, and he was frantically making phone calls out of an old looking rolodex, but he motioned us to sit

down. There were only two chairs, so I offered one to Yasui who gave a curtsey and sat down.

“We don’t know where he went, that’s what I’m telling you,” he was saying into the receiver. “But the students who say they know what’s going on have just walked into my office, Mrs. Vaisey, so I’m going to hear what they have to say and call you back. Yes, immediately, the instant I know more. Yes. Goodbye.”

He hit the hang up switch and dialed another extension, it rang several times.

“Carter? Lucien here. They’ve arrived, I’m forwarding my phone to you. Nothing yet. They don’t? Good. Yes, yes, as soon as possible.”

He slammed the receiver down and stabbed at the buttons, missing and hitting something else, and it took him a minute to undo that and do what he wanted.

“What in Hell is going on?” he shouted at us. Osman and I took a step back, and Yasui and Christina sat up straighter as though slapped, Yasui looked as though she was going to cry again.

“Sorry, I-” he took a deep breath. “I’m sorry about that. It’s just after twenty, fifty, a hundred years, people are suddenly remembering sons and daughters they sent to this school and apparently forgot about, until about an hour ago. It’s been chaos here ever since, *ESPers* popping in and out, *seers* having bizarre visions of the future, but of scenes that happened years ago, it’s chaos. You didn’t cause all this, I’m sure. So please, if you can tell me anything about this, anything at all, so I can reassure people and get this school back together, please do!”

“It all started when Kat noticed something was wrong,” I began, “and we...”

**Working Conditions**

*Always look for the silver lining in those clouds above*

“So if I’m understanding all this,” said Mr. DeLefeu, “you went through a whole ordeal in this “dark space” and then you destroyed this cup thing. That done, you found yourselves back on the bus as though nothing had happened?”

“That’s right, sir,” replied Osman. “Christina was still in the same position, in fact, so she hurt her knee in exactly the same way when the bus stopped the second time.”

“And my beaver was gone, even though I still had him active as we walked through the door,” I added.

“Beaver?”

“My spirit projection takes the form of a beaver.”

“Appropriate, I guess. All right, and you would describe this cup as a chalice, with a red stone on the right side, a blue stone in the middle, and a yellow stone on the left. It was made of gold, with a clear fluid in it, standing about this high?” He gestured with his hands.

We all nodded.

“But you had to walk out a door, the space didn’t disappear when you dumped it into the acid?”

We all shook our heads.

“It doesn’t sound familiar, but there is something I want to check on, because despite that, I think I know how to find out what it was. Wait right here, I’m going to go tell the short version of your story to some other teachers to see what they think, and get something out.”

He left, and we all sat or stood in silence waiting for him to come back. It took quite a while, I had pulled out a small book on *talismans* I had

slipped into my pocket on the way here, while Yasui and Christina (reluctantly) were playing Eye-Spy. Osman had debated calling a *galeari*, one of the only being he knew how to *petition*, to ask about the space they had been in. He seemed very hesitant about it, and decided against it, saying if the principal wanted Heaven's involvement, he would ask a real *petitioner*. I suspected something else was behind his decision, by the way he said "a real *petitioner*," but didn't want to make him uncomfortable by forcing the issue.

Finally the principal came back with two other warders, Miranda Chadwick and Sancha Herrera, and a heavy chest bound with three heavy chains.

"I'm going to show you something," he said, "which you must promise never to reveal to another soul that you have seen or that even exists. Do you understand me?"

We all nodded seriously.

"Are you sure-" started Mrs Herrera, but Mr DeLefeu cut her off.

"If they've seen it we have to be sure. I suspect it will solve another minor mystery about the book itself. Keys."

They each got out a key that unlocked one chain from around the chest, then a different set of keys for each lock on the chest itself. He opened it and pulled out a book, then began to page through it.

"Warders like us don't always create the nicest *talismans*," he said while flipping pages. "In fact some of them can be downright nasty, like the Soul Hoard Amulet. Sometimes they are experiments that haven't been thought all the way through, or sometimes just made by people who are insane. Not to mention so called "cursed" items, created by people being careless. Your cup was probably an experiment." He paused to read through a page, then nodded. "Thought so, look."

He showed the page to the other two warders and they gasped. "That page was blank before!"

He nodded, then spun the book around to show us. It was an exact picture of the cup we had just destroyed. Christina spoke first- "That's the one all right."

"So I was right, interesting." He spun the book back and made a note, then drew four lines under it. "I need you to sign here, as the last people who saw it, that you certify it was destroyed on this date." He handed Yasui, the closest to him, the pen, and she solemnly signed it. We all did, and he shut the book and put it back into the chest, locking it again.

"May we ask what would have happened if we had drank the water?" Osman asked nervously.

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“It’s fine, as it’s been destroyed, so there’s no harm in it. Basically the cup could absorb a demon and turn it into that liquid you saw. Then a person would drink that liquid, and basically fuse themselves with the demon, permanently. It wasn’t pretty. Oh, it would make you stronger, faster, more powerful, no question. Even give you access to some, if not all of, the demon’s abilities. But it would also drive you insane almost immediately. When last it was in the world, it was used to capture a powerful demon lord and sent away with a man who said he could hide it so well it would never be found. Of course, there may have been a time we needed it again, so it was asked that he make sure it could be found again by someone at least. I guess he did the job too well though, as the information about the cup vanished from the book, and from everyone’s memory, just like you all did.

“I remember seeing the blank page in the book though, but my predecessor couldn’t tell me why it was blank. Now we know. Somehow, everything that went into that space became forgotten, including people. I read all I just told you from the no longer blank pages describing the cup, I had no idea it even existed before this.”

“That is why you said what you did when you got on our bus!” said Osman.

“Exactly. The airport called and asked why the plane was only half full, did we have fewer students this year. Well, I was sure the plane should be full, but couldn’t remember anything about specific students. Albert came up to my office in a panic, claiming the sword was gone, that someone must have stolen it. I asked my *seers* to look for it, but it seemed to have vanished entirely. It was very, very strange. I think as time went on we would have thought less and less about it until we didn’t even remember we forgot you.”

“You should have seen it from our end.”

“I can only imagine.”

“So how was that space made? How did we get inside? Did those people we told you about that seemed to see it coming tell you anything?” asked Yasui.

“It seems way above any human ability to create,” he replied. “We’re checking out the kids now, we’ll have a better answer for you soon. If there is an answer.”

“So what happens now?” I asked.

He shook his head sadly. “I don’t know. The parents of a lot of those kids are dead, while the kids still think it’s some time in the 1920s. Those whose parents are alive will have aged decades if not more since they came

here, to say nothing of forgetting them all this time. What do we do with more than a hundred new students who believed they were going on a field trip this morning, but suddenly find themselves in their grandchildren's time? Goes without saying that your trip to Japan will have to wait until we get things sorted out. Classes may be postponed a few days until we decide if we need new teachers, it's all messed up here. For now, get something to eat, get some rest. It'll be a few days until everyone knows what's happened. Do you want your names mentioned as the kids that rescued those busses from being stuck in time?"

We all looked at each other, then shook our heads no. "Not yet, but maybe some day. It's enough pressure on me just knowing people know what I can do, to add saving a hundred other students my first month here? No way. And those people that got caught there for so long, they may not thank me, given what's happened to their families," I said. The others had their reasons, but we all decided it was best to keep our names out of it for now.

"I respect your decision. I want you to know though, you did good today, all of you. I'm proud of you. Not that this will be reflected in your grades in any way, or get you out of reports and such," he finished with a wink. "Now get out of here, I have phone calls to make."

We left his office and went down the stairs to the lower hallways, and headed to the cafeteria. We didn't talk much on the way, and as we sat down, Christina cleared her throat.

"I, um, I wanted to apologize to you all," she began. "I've been a bit of a jerk to you all, and you deserve better than that. So I'm sorry. I got to see a side of you I didn't ever expect to, and you each have worthwhile abilities and powers that make you good members of a team. So I don't hope to go through anything like that again, but I'd be glad to have you at my backs if something did go down. That's all I wanted to say."

"Wow, something has come back through with us and has taken Christina's shape," I said. "Think we should tell someone?"

"I'm being serious!"

"I know. It's okay. I think we all have a lot of potential that we're just realizing. Being in a situation like that makes me even more determined to learn a variety of skills and improve them all I can. We did make a pretty good team, didn't we?"

The others agreed with me and we started in on lunch.

## DUE PROCESS

“And you know what the best part is?” I asked. “With this trip to Japan and possibly even classes delayed, I bet I could finish that *talisman* I’m working on sooner!”

They all just rolled their eyes and wouldn’t talk to me for ten minutes after that.

“Was it something I said?”

Several days later I found myself standing in front of Mr. DeLefeu’s office with a large sheet of paper and my sword charm, ready to show him my work. Everyone knew what had happened by that point, and a couple of new teachers were being hired to handle the new students that had been recovered. Along with some psychologists, councilors, temporal physicists and there were rumors of a wizard or two looking into things, though magic was strictly outlawed by the Foundation. They wanted to be sure that space had collapsed or disappeared or somehow seal it off so no more kids went missing. They weren’t having much luck telling anything, from what I heard. The reprieve had left me plenty of time to work and I thought I was finally ready to see if my efforts were going to pay off.

“This’ll have to be quick Dean,” said Mr DeLefeu, “with everything going on around here I’m way behind on paperwork and such.”

“I can leave this with you if you can’t look at it now,” I replied. “I just thought you might like to look it over before I energize it.” I spread the paper out on his desk and dropped the sword into the middle of it.

His eyes went wide as he scanned the page. “No way,” he said, unbelieving. “No, you could not have figured it out that fast. You were supposed to work on it for a year and... this is really fine work! You did this?”

“I’ve done nothing else the past month. Oh, and study of course,” I added hastily.

“Of course,” he said, not taking his eyes off the sheet. “You’ve got a lot of repetition here.”

“I have to do the complete set of symbols for every line of energy the *talisman* can draw on,” I explained.

“And you’ve done it four times, I see.” He looked more closely. “Do you have two different spirals here?”

“Yes, in theory, the second one hides the whole thing like the sheath of the sword, so no one even can tell I have it, but I can still use it.”

“Can’t you just do it normally, put that in afterwords?”

“As far as I can tell, no, I think it has to be done simultaneously.”

“You realize if it’s wrong you’ll have to start all over.”

“I know. But I took Osman’s advice and had someone in the computer lab scan it. If I need to I can print it out, figure out what I did wrong, then trace the parts I want to leave and redo the parts I don’t think are right.”

“And of course if it works perfectly, anyone else can study this diagram to duplicate your efforts.”

“I’ll only give you the file, you can work out if it should be published or not. I wrote out as best I could how I did it, to match the style of that book you loaned me. That’s on the drive as well. You did seem concerned about the sword’s potential power.”

“And rightly, I think. You’ve been in enough ability focused studies classes to know how much more effective people born with what we call *spirit well* are than people without that gift.”

“And this is a bit better than that, I know, for a lot of reasons. Still, in a war against demons, every edge should be used, right?”

“That’s also a dangerous way of thinking, but we can talk about that another time. I don’t see anything obvious about this that would cause it to fail, so go ahead, see what happens.”

I smiled and took it off the desk, laying it flat on the floor and bending down over it. I drew the sword and drew its energy into myself, then focused my energy with what I had learned in my *spirit manipulation* class. In a tremendous burst of power I placed my hands on the start of the spiral and concentrated on placing the power into the charm, feeling the energy rush out of me and into the paper. The symbols glowed, pulling in more and more power from me and the sword, until I was almost at my limit. Mr DeLefeu looked like he was about to knock me away from it, when suddenly the symbols unwound from the spiral and sucked into the charm, leaving it glowing and hot. Mr DeLefeu and I looked at each other over the piece of paper. I was panting and sweating with the exertion, and almost collapsed, but he reached over and steadied me.

“That was quite the energy that thing sucked out of you,” he remarked. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I guess that’s what happens when you try to make four new *ley lines*.”

“Yes. Good thing you have as much energy as you do, and that you had the sword to help. It might have killed you otherwise.”

## DUE PROCESS

I tapped it, and found it cool enough to touch.

“Just a second,” said Mr DeLefeu, and took it in his hand. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment.

“Well, it either didn’t work at all or your sealing is working perfectly. I can’t sense any energy coming off of it at all. Would you like to do the honors?”

“Did Luke Skywalker test the Light Saber that he built after Darth Vader cut his hand off and he lost his?” I asked, referring to the book *Shadows of the Empire* I had read from my adoptive father’s collection.

“I... yes?”

“Well, he did. He said he could have had R2D2 do it, but didn’t think it was fair to risk him like that. After all, he made it, he should take the risk.”

“If you say so. Anyway, no risk here, if it didn’t work it’s just the same tiny hunk of metal it was before.”

I nodded, taking the *talisman* back from him after sheathing the sword again. I clipped it to the chain I had made and wound it around my arm, clipping it there too. It was sized for my ankle, of course, but it would do for now. I imagined pulling power from the sword but directed my efforts to the *talisman* instead- Nothing. Well, no matter, I had been lucky to get power from the sword the first time, so I decided to put a little more effort into it. I was rewarded with the familiar flood of power from the sword replacement, and I smiled widely.

“I can feel more power inside you, so I guess it worked.”

“It sure did. This is amazing! I actually made a *talisman* and it worked. Wait, you can sense that I’m using it? I hadn’t considered that, the binding only keeps people from sensing the *talisman* itself. I guess I’ll have to live with it.”

“It’s not a big deal, you’ll only need it when fighting or doing something that needs that extra energy, and no one is going to be sensing you that closely at that time.”

“I guess you’re right.” I let the power go, then picked up the paper and the sword from the floor. “I’ll go give this back to Albert, here’s the file of the final diagram I used.” I handed Mr DeLefeu a flash drive, which he stuck into his computer and copied off.

“You better keep this safe, I don’t want it floating around out there until I decide what to do with it,” he said, handing it back to me.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep track of it.”

“Congratulations, by the way, you just passed your first year of ability focused studies as an *artificer*.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, unless you totally slack off the entire rest of the year, which I don’t think you’ll do Mr Beaver. I’ll have a word with your teacher and make sure they know you made something you can’t show them, but which passes you.”

“Deal,” I said. “I’ve been reading about so many other cool things, I can’t wait to get started, so don’t worry about that!”

I left the office, humming excitedly to myself. It had worked, I was a real *artificer*, and I had made something only one other person had made, at least to my knowledge.

*You tried to destroy my world, I thought to myself, but I owe you big time, Charna. Thanks.*

Albert was rightly stunned when I handed him the sword back and told him I was finished with it.

“You shoved all the power of this sword into that little thing, plus the shielding from the scabbard?” he asked, looking at my charm bracelet. “That’s fantastic!”

“Form doesn’t matter,” I replied. “Heck, as an *alchemist* you should know that.”

“Well,” he admitted, “you’ve got me there. So what are you going to work on now that you’ve got this solved?”

“Not sure,” I answered, pulling out my list of possible *talismans*. “There are all kinds of things I want to make, making some of what I can do, like energy blasts or calling out my beaver, easier. There’s something that I think will let me move faster, or a sort of energy barrier that acts as invisible armor- honestly the possibilities are endless. I want to start learning to call on the aid of spirits too, so I guess maybe something that makes that easier? I guess I’ll just have to see what I think is best after the field trip.”

“Ah yes, the freshman field trip. I remember mine, some weird stuff happened. Be careful, but of course this is Demongate so I don’t have to tell you that!”

We both laughed. “I guess you’re right. Anyway, thanks for lending me the sword. I’ve given the diagram that makes my charm here to Mr DeLefeu so if he decides to make the information public, any *artificer* can use it to create something similar. He’s hesitant of course, carrying around an unlimited number of *ley lines* based on how good an *artificer* you are

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helps demons just as much as it helps us, if they get ahold of any that are made.”

“Yeah, things were always going after that sword, so it’s good you did the sealing on it. Waving around the kind of power it offers would make you a big target.”

“Which is the last thing I need. Anyway, we finally get to go on our field trip in two days, so I’m looking forward to it. I’ve got some homework to, well, start, so I’ll see you later, okay?”

“If you ever want to borrow the sword again, let me know.”

“I will.”

**Over and Over again**

*As I was saying- Have you seen a Japanese game show?*

The first few days of October dawned cool as about fifty sleepy first years, myself included, made their way to the front of the school where a bus waited-

“Wow, *deja vu*,” said Christina as we walked out to the front of the school.

“The what?” asked Osman.

“It’s that feeling you get that you’ve done this exact thing before,” I explained. “Let’s just hope it ends better this time. No, let’s hope it *starts* better this time.”

“I second that. What, no sword this time?” she asked, glancing at my hip where the sword was before.

“No, that was just a loaner.”

“Don’t know why you would want a sword anyway,” she remarked. “Why would you want to be in the face of the thing that’s trying to kill you when you could be twenty meters away?”

“It’s a good point,” I conceded.

“Hello, everyone,” chirped Yasui, waving and running up to greet us.

“Well, you’re in a better mood than the last time we left for this field trip,” I remarked. “What happened?”

“I have something to look forward to, this time.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Showing you guys around. You didn’t forget, did you?”

I laughed. “Nope, I’m holding you to that. After all, I got you out of that weird space, didn’t I?”

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“I think that was a team effort?” Christina chimed in.

“I guess...”

We both smiled, Christina had been a little bit easier to get along with since we got back, which was nice, considering she hung out with Yasui all the time.

The trip proved frighteningly uneventful this time, which put us all at ease, though what Albert said was nagging at me. Maybe since something didn’t happen on the way there it would happen once we arrived. But that was just my paranoia, so I tried not to listen to it. On the plane we were given a packet of information about the region and what we were going to see.

Our destination was the Takkoku no Iwaya temple, built in the 9th century. It was outside central Hiraizumi, wherever that was, and built into the face of a cliff. The real story of course was the sealed demon gate found inside the cliff, which was also our true destination. Along the way we would learn a bit about Japanese culture, see some other sights, and learn about demons that tended to appear more in Japan than anywhere else for one reason or another. I asked Yasui about it, but she had never been there. “Do you know how many temples there are in Japan?” she said, rolling her eyes, when I asked.

“I have no idea, how many?” I wondered.

“Tons, I don’t know. They’re boring, who cares?”

“You would care if that gate to the Demon World suddenly opened again.”

She just snorted. “As if.”

“Better demon gates than weird mazes and that other stuff,” remarked Osman.

“I agree,” I agreed. “Of course just like our school’s Gate, this one has a kind of maze leading up to it too, I guess.”

“Ugh, we won’t have to find our own way through, will we?” asked Christina.

“I don’t really know,” I replied. “The pamphlet doesn’t say. Anyway, even if we did, we have an advantage. Two advantages, really. First there’s Osman’s eyes, and Kat can also fly around and see where it is. I almost hope they do make us find our own way, just so we can be the first people there!”

“Could you find your own way?” asked Yasui.

“Given time, or with powers?”

“With powers.”

“Man, I don’t know. Maybe using ESP I could work my way through better than a normal person, just by trying to feel out which was the best way to go, but I wouldn’t want to try it unless absolutely necessary. If I really got lost in there I might just use *sending* to get a message out to someone to come look for me. And I could use a tiny energy blast to mark passages I had gone down so even loops wouldn’t slow me down for long. Guess I should learn to project my senses like Kat here, but how often am I going to get lost in a maze?”

We laughed. “Hopefully, never again.”

We made an uneventful landing in Japan and boarded another bus to take us to the hotel where we would be staying for the duration of our visit. Yasui was excitedly pointing things out to us and reading signs and everything, but honestly it didn’t look that much different from a big city in the US. It was a little weird to realize that, suddenly, being American meant you were the one who looked different instead of the other way around. I mentioned this to Osman.

“Way I see it,” he said, “we’re apart from everyone now, no? Even going back home, walking down street, we have secret kept from everyone because of this.” He tapped his head. “Is really anyplace we call home now?”

It was a sobering thought.

We all checked into the hotel, I heard Miss LaRoche say to a student, “You’re thinking of sneaking out later. I don’t recommend it.” And realized why there were so few “grownups” taking this trip with us. *Seers* had probably checked us all out and only needed to keep an eye on the ones that were going to cause trouble. We had a chance to check out our rooms before a short presentation in one of their meeting rooms, going over the rules and such once more, before dinner. Yasui was happy to recommend things on the menu. A little too helpful, if you know what I mean.

“You’re going to make me eat a bunch of weird stuff and then laugh at me later when you tell me what it really is, aren’t you?” I asked her.

She pretended to be upset, but she couldn’t stop smiling so I figured I was right.

“Is traveling all the way to Japan,” said Osman, “But is feeling like not having left home.”

I had to agree with him, it just didn’t seem Japanese enough, you

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know apart from all the Japanese people walking around and hearing Japanese come out of TVs.

“What did you expect, Godzilla?” asked Yasui.

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and ninjas will attack you in your rooms tonight,” said Christina.

“I wouldn’t say no to one or two. I mean for each of us,” he said, turning to me. “I don’t want you to feel left out.”

“Oh thanks,” I said, dripping with sarcasm, “for not hogging all the fun for yourself.”

“Is no problem.”

I just shook my head.

We awoke the next day to find no ninjas had attacked the hotel while we slept, and we were off to the temple. Because the temple was kind of small, we actually broke into groups, some groups would have the lecture today, some would do sight seeing, and our group was lucky enough to be picked to see the temple first thing! We had gotten in a bit late the day before, but now in the morning we really got to see just how crowded Japan was. It took us quite a while to get from our hotel to the temple, but as we got closer I could see why this place had been chosen. Apart from the whole “guarding the demon gate” thing, I mean.

The temple really did sit at the base of a wall of rock that towered over us, trees clinging to the sides as if in defiance of gravity. The stone was colored mostly brown and orange, and there was no apparent pattern to the design that I could see. Broad stone steps led up to the main building, a stone dog at either side with heads turned to look at the other. In front, four weird bird house looking things made of grey stone were sort of randomly plunked in front of the building, each about twice as tall as a grownup.

Apparently in the area were originally 108 statues of Bishamonten, but only 33 were left, and these things obviously weren’t him, so I wasn’t sure what they were. The building itself seemed to be on stilts, with thick, black beams of wood rising it high in the air and supporting it. As we walked past I noticed marks had been carved into each beam, but I couldn’t tell if they were actual *artificer* markings or just something decorative. The outside of the temple was mainly red, with a very low red railing running around the outside. A set of wooden stairs was attached to each side, which seemed sturdy enough. Christina however looked at them with disgust.

“Not to your liking?” I asked her.

“Go up a rickety staircase to a temple to go down into some hole in

the mountain here, all to see a very uninteresting marker for where a gate to the Demon World once was? Call me crazy, but it's not high on my list of things to do before I die."

"Okay, you're crazy. Come on!"

She didn't look too happy about it, but she climbed the stairs with the rest of us up to the temple. We were met by an older man who introduced himself as Asadoko Yoshimoto and his daughter, Asadoko Raye, who oversaw the temple. He explained a bit about the history of the temple and the surrounding countryside, and let us look around a bit. Yasui told us it was pretty standard for a temple, so she looked a bit bored. Raye asked her something in Japanese, and she answered back, and they went back and forth a bit. Finally it was time to go see the gate, so we were all taken in the back and shown the secret passage leading further into the mountain.

"Now that we're away from prying eyes I can introduce myself again," said Yoshimoto. "I'm a graduate of Demongate High myself, and I'm an *artificer*, as is my daughter. You might have seen her work on the beams outside that hold the temple up. She made *wards* out of wooden tiles that make each beam invulnerable, so it won't rot or succumb to age. She has some good ideas, my daughter does. Now, moving into the mountain there are three paths. It's not really a maze, the gate wasn't far enough back for that, so originally it was just to contain any demons that might come through, break them up into smaller, easier to manage groups. Now of course the gate is sealed, so we can take the three paths so we're not so crowded in the tunnels."

"Thank God," whispered Christina.

"So we'll split up into three groups, one group will go down with myself, another with my daughter, and the third with a prefect from the school. Along the way there will be a short discussion about what exactly gates are, how they are closed, and we'll all meet up at the gate itself and you can take a look. Then we'll head back here. Any questions?"

"So we can't get lost?" asked Christina.

"Impossible," he answered. "It's fairly straightforward, just keep walking in one direction or the other and you'll get to the gate or back here with no trouble."

There were no other questions, so we split ourselves off and went with the Prefect, taking the center tunnel down towards the gate.

"So a gate isn't really a gate in the truest sense," the prefect, who had introduced himself as Anthony, started in as we walked. We all held flash-

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lights as we walked down the hollowed out tunnel towards the gate. “It’s just a weakness in the wall separating our reality from another. To see one, one would just see a hole in the air leading to another place. We call them ‘gates’ because when one was discovered, it was marked in some way, usually having a stone archway put over top of it, as a marker and as someplace to put the power that closes it.”

“So the gate under the school isn’t a gate,” I whispered to Osman, nodding. “It’s just a hole with an archway.”

He nodded back.

“The archway,” the prefect continued, “is given mystic symbols by an *artificer* and turned into a *talisman*, basically pinching shut the hole so nothing can come through. Now, why can’t the one under the school be closed that way? Well, you know about *ley lines*, right? Lines of power that encircle the world?”

I nodded my head. I was carrying around four of them, after all. Hehehe.

“Well, there’s twelve of them smack dab in the center of that gate, and that really plays havoc with trying to close it. Believe me, they’ve tried. It was decided before the school was built that pinching shut that area of local space would disrupt those lines, and as you can guess, that’s a problem. So we live with it, and guard it, and hope something bad doesn’t happen to Mr Stilling so Cerberus goes poof and lets a bunch of demons through. He’s the one who’s soul bound to Cerberus, which keeps him down there on this side of the gate as a guard.”

“Why not just walk him through?” asked Yasui.

“Good question! It would be easier on Stilling, but if something happens to Cerberus, this way he knows it immediately, and can re-summon him right away. If he was just there and got killed, that would be the end of Cerberus. There’s only one of him, after all. Unlike gremlins or imps that number in the thousands.”

“What is *soul binding* all about?” I asked. Hadn’t Albert said something about one of his friends being soul bound?

“Just what the name implies. Say I *summon* a demon, right? Now say I want to keep him around for years, or have him scout an area and report back to me instantly. Or maybe I want to make myself tougher, you know? Or not have him count against my *draw*, so I can *summon* more stuff. With *soul binding* I would get all of that, plus be able to command the demon to do something it might not want to.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“Dealing with any otherworldly force is dangerous,” he agreed.

“*Summoners* have *draw* too?” asked Osman.

“Certainly,” he agreed. “I take it you’re a *petitioner*?”

“That’s right.”

“Odd that *petitioners* can’t do something similar, the rest of our abilities match up otherwise.”

“We probably could,” countered Osman, “but angels would probably take exception to such a thing.”

“I don’t doubt it. That’s not to say demons don’t, of course.”

“Of course, plus we don’t typically have to bargain with those we *petition* like you do.”

He laughed. “Sure, sure, just don’t do anything the Heavens don’t like or they’ll just take your powers away like that.” He snapped his fingers.

“They wouldn’t!” said Yasui.

Osman nodded sadly. “There have been cases where *petitioners* and *holy chosen* have lost access to their powers.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah, you probably thought the Heavens were all about forgiveness. Not so much, actually. Ask Lot’s Wife.”

“Well, Heaven is limited in certain ways,” began Osman.

“While they let demons corrupt people on Earth left and right?”

“That is because-”

“As much as I hate to break up what will no doubt be a fascinating religious dialog, shouldn’t we have, I don’t know, been there by now?” broke in Christina, looking around nervously.

“Well, gee,” said Anthony, scratching his head and looking around. “I really have no idea, I’ve never been here before. Don’t worry about it, like he said, we can’t get lost, right? It’s a tunnel, not a maze.”

“You must have been told how far it is!”

“He said we would reach it in a minute or two. It’s no big deal.”

“Are you-” this time Christina was interrupted by a loud noise behind us, exactly the sound a cave in would make if you were standing right next to it.

“That could be a big deal.” said Anthony, staring back the way we had come from.

“Tell me that wasn’t a cave in,” said Christina, looking a bit pale now.

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“Even if it was, there’s two more tunnels, remember? We just walk to the gate, and take a different tunnel out. No big deal. I’m going to go check it out, you guys just wait here, okay?”

“Be careful,” said Osman.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Be back in a sec!”

Anthony went back through the passage and we shined our lights around, though the stone of the cave was rather uninteresting. We waited.

We waited some more.

“Okay, this is seriously getting creepy, guys,” said Christina, shaking her bracelet out of her jacket. “Osman, is there enough light over there for you to see what’s up?”

I never got to hear his reply as I was suddenly knocked off my feet and sent sprawling, losing my grip on the flashlight. A gash appeared on my chest and I cried out, mainly in surprise, but then it seemed to get a little better. I was still injured, and I saw something streak away down the passage.

“There were three of them, did you see?” shouted Christina, her bow leaping into her hand.

“Are you alright?” asked Yasui, running over to me. “Whatever that was, it’s way faster than I am!”

“What hit me?” I weakly asked.

“I just saw a blur, I don’t know. Something became visible but it took off right after that. Can you bring out your beaver? You’re the only one of us that can heal.”

*That’s not exactly true,* I heard in my head. *Osman, if you please.*

“Right, my sister can heal you a little, let’s do it and get out of here,” he said, rushing to kneel down beside me. He put his hand on my chest and I felt my wound close up a bit more, and the bleeding stopped.

“She did it, you’ll be fine in a couple of hours. Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I think so, I think it looks worse than it is.”

Standing, I saw my shirt had a jagged cut through it, like a blade had been used to cut me. Super. I stumbled a bit and winced, it didn’t look like too bad a cut anymore, but it still hurt a lot.

“So demons are loose in these tunnels?” I asked rhetorically, bending my will to my energy *talisman*. Luckily, I managed to pull it off, and I felt energy flood into me. I might not be able to see these guys until they attacked, but at least- wait a minute- no, it wouldn’t work.

“I really wish I could do *alchemist* stuff better,” I said, as Osman leaned against me to help me stand. “I would turn the air here into fog and we could see them coming.”

“I could put up my barrier, but it drains me pretty quickly.” said Christina, peering down the corridor.

“Wait, something doesn’t add up here. That collapse we heard was from where we came from, why would demons seal themselves in? Unless they were fighting someone down there who was coming up behind us?”

“They ran off back towards the gate, maybe they figured they had their fun and are leaving,” said Yasui.

“You want to risk that?”

“We can’t see them until they attack, so what do you think our next move should be?”

“We have to help Anthony, he could be hurt too, he hasn’t come back yet.”

“Well,” reasoned Christina, “if there was a cave in he couldn’t have gone far, he wasn’t gone that long. Let’s go back that way and see if we can find him or get out of here.”

“I just hope everyone else is all right. If the sealing somehow failed and the gate is open, who knows what could have come through it? The guy or his daughter who runs this place should be able to close it though, I’m sure.”

“You can go that way if you want, but I’m getting out of here,” said Christina firmly, heading back the way we came.

“Can you walk?” Osman asked me.

“Walk and call out my beaver, see if I don’t.”

I focused energy on ignoring my wound and tried calling out my spirit projection. It took me a moment, but I managed it, and he healed me the rest of the way. I pinched my shirt together and focused on it, willing just the two edges of the cloth to join together. While I still had a bloody stain there, at least it wasn’t torn anymore.

“Too bad you couldn’t do that to yourself,” remarked Osman as we ran back up the passageway.

“Yeah, that’s a little bit beyond me, humans are a little more complex to put back together than cloth.”

“This is crazy!” shouted Christina, stopping. “Either this tunnel is way longer than we were told, or we’re stuck in some kind of weird space thing again. We should be out of here by now! Katrina, go on ahead please and figure out what we’re doing wrong, will you?”

Again, Christina had barely finished saying this when we heard a fluttering of winds and a truly bizarre thing came flapping and laughing down the hallway overhead. And I say “head” literally, as that’s what it

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was. It had no body, and in place of ears it had bizarre looking wings, which it was flapping to move forward. It stopped directly overhead and I looked up at it, where what looked like intestines drooped down from underneath it. At this point, several things happened at once- The head spotted Christina and said “Oh, that looks like a tasty one!” I froze in shock, literally was unable to move for fear of this thing, which didn’t seem characteristic of me. Christina raised her bow and fired, shouting “Get away from me you disgusting thing.”

Naturally, this was a mistake. Because of the shock or being in the endless cavern or something, her arrow sped *upward*, missed the head, and impacted on the ceiling of the cave, exploding. This weakened the ceiling and a ton of rocks started pouring down on top of us. The head glanced up and tried to get away, but rocks overtook it and sent it crashing towards me.

“Watch out!” shouted Yasui, who smashed her shoulder into me, knocking me out of the way, but getting buried herself. Dust and rocks went everywhere, I gashed my arm as I fell over, and felt my beaver take a bunch of hits as it also got buried in the rubble. I had presence of mind enough to dismiss it before it got too crushed under there, before realizing it couldn’t actually be hurt by a cave in. It was purely supernatural, and thus, *invulnerable*. Only Osman held a flashlight at this point, which he played about the cave to see if we were all right.

“What did I do?” wailed Christina. “Is everyone all right?”

“I think Yasui is trapped under that, she shoved me aside before I got hit. We’ve got to get her out!”

“How?” asked Osman, looking at the huge pile of rock that now closed off one end of the tunnel. Was it the exit or further into the mountain? I was turned around now so I couldn’t tell.

Suddenly, Anthony came running shouting, “What was- oh no!”

“There are demons in these tunnels, and now it’s my fault she’s buried under there. Do something!”

“Someone’s under that? Oh great, I don’t know how to *summon* Earth elementals, what else can we do?”

*She’s still alive in there, I can still hear her thoughts*, said Katrina. *But she’s scared and it’s hard to breathe. We need to get her out soon.*

“I’m afraid to use *telekinesis*, my control isn’t so great. Again if I was an *alchemist* I could just move all this rock out of the way with a thought. We’ll just have to dig her out ourselves. Come on!”

Anthony cut a piece of his shirt off with a knife, and started flapping

it while chanting. Osman looked at him like he was going crazy, but I knew what he was doing- *summoning* something. I was right, and a couple of seconds later, a couple of ghostly flying sheets appeared and started drifting around aimlessly.

“Don’t make any loud noises,” Anthony said to us. He turned to the ittan-momen, “Help us clear these rocks out of here.”

The sheets seemed to nod, and started pulling rocks out of the pile and floating them away, back and forth.

I managed to bring my spirit projection out again, and we started work. It took a tense couple of minutes but we started at the top. Working with the demons we managed to quickly break through to the other side. We saw the rest of the group that had come with us, three weasel demons, and a couple of other little demons hard to make out in the darkness.

“Are you okay?” Mr. Asadoko asked tensely.

“We are, but Yasui is still trapped under here.”

“We should hurry.”

With the combined efforts of everyone there we quickly moved the pile of rubble and exposed Yasui, who was looking very beat up, dirty, and unconscious.

One of the weasel looking demons darted forward and put his hand on her, making Christina get her bow out again. Mr. Asadoko held up a hand, “It’s okay, he’s the healer of the group, he’s helping.”

“What?” said Osman. “Aren’t those things what attacked us before?”

“Yes, well, this little adventure has been ruined, so let’s get her out into the open air and I’ll explain everything.”

“You better,” muttered Christina under her breath.

We walked the short distance to the outside, Christina shaking her head and saying, “We were almost out. Another few seconds and we would have made it.”

“Ah, not exactly,” said Mr. Asadoko. “But let’s see to this poor girl before anything else. Is anyone a *holy chosen*?”

One girl came forward and laid her hands on Yasui, concentrating. I saw two older looking guys come forward and saw the three weasel demons vanish out of the corner of my eye. Yasui groaned and opened her eyes, coughing a bit, and was helped to sit up. She looked for me.

“You’re okay,” she managed.

“Thanks to you.” I replied. “We don’t have house points, but you get a hundred in my book.”

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“Why don’t we have house points?” she weakly asked. “What happened anyway?”

“It’s my fault, I missed what I was aiming at and put too much energy into the arrow. That brought the place down. I’m sorry, Yasui, because of me you got hurt. Guess I haven’t practiced as much as I thought.”

“Well, you were trying to save us, so I’ll only deduct 10 house points. Come here.”

She grabbed Christina and hugged her, showing there was no hard feelings. The *holy chosen* girl looked at my shirt. “Do you need healing as well?”

“My arm is pretty gashed up, this one is from earlier,” I said, indicating my shirt. “So just the arm, if you don’t mind.”

She nodded and started healing me.

“Now,” said Christina, untangling herself from Yasui and pointing to Mr Asadoko. “You are going to tell me what demons were doing in that tunnel, why they attacked us, and why I nearly killed one of my friends.”

“I don’t know what went wrong,” he said, raising his hands in surrender. “We always have *seers* go over every step of the way beforehand, many times, to make sure no student is in real danger during the trail.”

“Trail?” echoed Christina. “Wait, you do this deliberately?”

“You’re the first to figure it out so fast,” said a teacher, Mr. Lamberti. “But yes, we are training you to fight demons, after all, so before you go into real combat you must be exposed to what combat is all about. I do apologize though, as a *seer* myself I’m not sure what went wrong that we didn’t foresee this.”

“So what was supposed to happen?” I asked.

“Basically, you were caught between two infinity *wards*, one which activated after you passed it, trapping you in one segment of the cave. Then various low level demons would fly or run past until each of the three groups made it to the gate. You would have found it “open,” another trick created by *wards*, and you would have gotten to watch Mr Asadoko here “seal” it back up. Naturally you would have been sworn to secrecy, so that, quote, panic didn’t set in that all gates were opening unquote. Then you would be told how they have to be checked every once in a while, etc. etc. You come out feeling good about having survived a demon attack and helping to close a gate. Plus you get some confidence for the time when you’re facing a real gate, with real demons pouring out of it.”

“And all field trips are like this?”

“Yes, they all have some element of adventure to them. Please don’t go spreading it around, and try to forget it for your next one.”

“Right... And they all go smoothly?”

“For the most part.”

“Figures my group would be the exception. If the shenanigans are over, can we now go see the gate like we were supposed to?”

“Can you walk, Yasui? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine,” Yasui said, standing up. “But I need a hot bath, pronto.”

We all laughed, relieved.

We all walked back into the cave, Christina somewhat hesitantly, but I did hear her apologize for the damage to the cave, and be reassured an *alchemist* could take care of it later, and not to worry.

Which got me thinking about alchemy some more, I had some questions to ask Albert when we got back.

**Out of the Corner of Your Eye**

*Daddy, daddy, there's a monster under my bed!*

So the groups reconvened at the hotel and a fairly good cover-up was put in action. Everyone made out that nothing too exciting had happened and that was that. We then had a great time the rest of our stay in Japan, but all too soon had to leave for the school again.

I sought out Albert to ask him what being an *alchemist* was like to try and work out if I should unlock that power within myself.

"I would not trade my abilities for anyone else's," he began, "if that's what you're asking."

"It just seems to me that alchemy is so useful, and could have come in handy on my trip. However, there are *talismans* I can make to make myself better at those skills, so it's a question of do I put effort into making them or becoming an *alchemist* like you so I don't need them?"

"You can make alchemy skills better?" he asked, eyes widening. "That would be amazing!"

"What do you mean, aren't you already amazing at *transmutation* and stuff yourself? Why would you need to get better?"

"Using my skills mainly requires me to reason out a surface or substance, and sometimes I can get it wrong. There have been times I wanted a stone barrier from the floor but only got a few centimeters lifted. Then other times I've way over judged things and could move tons of rock when all I need is a couple of kilograms. So if you know the basics of the skill, and can get a *talisman* to make up for your lack of skill, it might just be better to go that route. There aren't a lot of skills to learn, but it has taken me a couple of years to get this far, so it would take you the same time. But if you can just make something that makes you better, why not go for it?"

“Because it could be taken away from me.”

“I suppose, but if someone was kidnapping you or something, they would still have to deal with all the rest of the things you can do, and then you get your stuff back!”

“I guess you’re right, I tend to over think things.”

“And say you later decide to become an *alchemist*? That *talisman* will still help you, right?”

“Well yes, the effort won’t be wasted.”

“So there you are! You are very lucky, you know? Learn the basics of something, skip all the training normally required, become really good at it anyway.”

“Yeah, I just have to carry a bunch of stuff around with me. Still, thanks for the advice, I’ll keep thinking about it.”

It was on my way back to my dorm room when Miss Herrera, one of the *artificer* teachers, spotted me and came over.

“Hey Dean, how was Japan?”

“Very informative,” I answered. “In more ways than one. I enjoyed it.”

“Good, good. Have you been to see the principal yet?”

“I didn’t know he was looking for me.”

“He mentioned it after he came looking for a book I had with a specific *talisman* in it. Said it should be done by the time you got back, so you might want to go see what he had in mind.”

“A new *talisman*? You bet! Thanks.”

She nodded and walked away, so I made my way to the principal’s office and knocked on the door.

“Dean, this is a surprise! Did you need something?”

“I thought you wanted to see me. Sorry if I’m disturbing you, I can come back later if you need me to.”

“No, no, I did want to see you, actually. How did you know?”

“I know everything.” Managed to say that with a straight face, but then continued as he looked at me skeptically. “Actually, I saw Miss Herrera and she said you were working on something you wanted to show me.”

“And right she was, take a look!”

He grabbed a leather bag from on his desk and tossed it to me. I caught it, but it seemed empty. I opened it and peered inside. Still empty. I looked up at him.

## DUE PROCESS

“What exactly am I looking at?”

He chuckled, “Here, I’ll show you,” and reached for it. I handed it back and he stuck his hand into it, then said “healing *ward*.” To my astonishment he pulled a *ward* out of what I thought was an empty bag!

“You actually made a bag of holding?” I managed to say.

“If you mean a bag with a pocket dimension inside of it where I can stick stuff and later retrieve it, yes. Interested?”

“Heck yes!” I said. “That’s amazing.”

“I thought you might think that way. I was thinking about it after what you said about *wards* getting messed up and torn and stolen from you so I did some research. Got busy with the whole ‘time displaced’ students so I wasn’t able to actually make it until now, but it went well. Wasn’t too bad, you could probably handle it. I’ve noted down the method I used to create it, I’m sure you can work it out from there.”

“You did that for me? Thanks a lot. This would seem to negate most of my arguments against *wards*.”

He shrugged. “I thought so. Anyway, it was no big deal, it was what you said that got me interested in the problem anyway. I would have just kept carrying them around like I always had if not for that. You know how much it irks me to lose a *ward* I made a week ago, and then have it turn up two days after I need it? Now they can stay nice and tidy in here.”

“Until someone steals the bag.”

“Oh yeah, didn’t think about that. Wait, I think I could work around that too, just a minute. I mean I could just ask one of my *seers* to find it for me, but a student might be uncomfortable about it... hummmmm.”

He went over to his bookcase and got down a large volume, then started paging through it.

“Wow,” he said after a moment, “that doubles the complexity at least. And there are some warnings here, well, take a look for yourself.”

He spun the book and I looked over the writing and the symbols printed on the next page. Basically a formula for making an object have a *true owner*, which one way or another would always come back if stolen or lost. It mentioned the danger of having the item out of your possession for too long, which I nodded at. “I see what you mean. But something as small as a bag like that I could keep with me at all times. And it’s more convenient than lugging a bunch of stuff around, so I could see always wanting to have it with me. Actually, you could keep your *ward* making materials in there, and always be able to whip up a *ward* when you need it!”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

“I should probably put this on first, then make the pocket dimension energy based?”

“Actually, the other way around. Do the easier part first, then the true owner that’s more complex,” he said, putting a scrap of paper in the book and closing it. “Just get this back to me when you’re done.”

“Can anyone take stuff out?”

“No,” he shook his head. “You have to know exactly where the object is you’re taking out, and as you put it in there, only you know that. Thus if someone else put something in there, you couldn’t take it out. Got it?”

“Got it. This school is just so amazing.”

“Glad it meets with your approval,” he muttered sarcastically. “And that you still have that attitude after your little, uh, scrape in the caves.”

“Yeah, I’m thinking of making something that gives me *regeneration*, just a little, but enough that I can heal after fake or real demon attacks, that sort of thing. As I’ve been injured in some way both times I’ve tried to leave the school, which isn’t making me paranoid at all.”

“Yeah, I should make one of those, *regeneration* slows your aging down too, you know. So even if it’s not healing wounds it’s doing you some good.”

“Really? I’m all for that, I don’t think one lifetime or even two is going to be enough to learn all I want to learn.”

“I know how you feel.”

“Thanks for this, I’ll get it back to you soon. Oh, there is one other thing, since I’m here.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m not much of a fighter, but I hang around with two girls who I’m thinking will be amazing fighters someday. Is there some *ward* I can stick on them to make them even better? Now that I have a magic bag, I’d like something to put in it!”

“Wow, you asking about *wards*, thought you hated the idea.”

“Not so much now, and being attacked by demons, even pretend, lends a different perspective to things.”

“That’s why we do it! Wards huh? Who are these girls again?”

“An inheritor with boots, that’s Yasui, and Christina, she’s a *spirit enigmist* with a bow.”

“Oh yeah, a good team you’ve got there. One ranged attacker, one close attacker, and your roommate can *petition* angels, and has an *ESPer* on his shoulder, right?”

## DUE PROCESS

I nodded.

“What could help all of them I wonder.” He went back to his bookshelf and got a book on *wards*, leafing through it. “They all need different things, something that makes them stronger doesn’t help. How about faster? Yeah, here we go!” He grabbed another sheet of paper, folded it, and stuck it into the book.

“Take a look at that, it might be what you want. Otherwise, take a look through there, you should find some good ideas.”

“Will do!”

The next two months passed very quickly. I was busy learning how to create *wards*, one *ward* anyway. I also worked on calling the spirit of the ant, making my *regeneration* charm, a bag of holding, and I guess I took some classes too. Yasui and Christina really liked the *ward* I learned to make- it made them much faster in a fight. We practiced me grabbing them out of the bag and slapping them on so we wouldn’t have to think about it if we got attacked again. I went home for Thanksgiving, and then Christmas, and things at the school seemed normal enough.

The extra students had been dealt with through a combination of “welcome to the future” activities, councilors, and a lot of patience. I had spoken to some in my classes, and it was amazing to see their reactions to things we took for granted, like the internet. They seemed to be assimilating well, but I couldn’t help but wonder if the *ESPers* in the school weren’t giving them a little push away from being depressed about the whole thing. I don’t know what I would do if I suddenly woke up 80 years in my own future, after all! The hallways were a little more crowded, some new teachers were hastily hired, but everyone pulled together to make them feel welcome. I had been worried about them being picked on, kids are kids after all, but who would dare make trouble in the halls when *seers* would know about it before you even thought about it? So everyone tended to be on their best behavior, and honestly, knowing we were all Demongate students brought us together like nothing else could. It was “us” against “them,” with the “them” being demons and people who used their powers improperly. Our field trips especially were designed to make us work together to solve problems, and were structured so every kind of power type might be the solution, if you could just think of it. Our little group knowing they were staged helped us see them as fun challenges anyway, so we looked forward to them.

Which is not to say during that time strange things didn't go on, it was Demongate, after all. Rumors started and then persisted of a very beautiful girl wandering the halls at night. Osman and I woke up one morning to find deep scratches running down our hallway, then up the wall, across the ceiling, down the other wall, and back down the hallway over and over. A couple of days later windows started getting smashed by some unidentified force, and strange noises were heard in the halls for several nights after that. People were starting to get nervous about the whole thing, which peaked two weeks later when Yasui said every light bulb in the girl's dorm was smashed simultaneously during the night. The next night a student was found completely torn apart, but the odd thing was there were no students missing! So everyone got questioned and *seers* were going nuts trying to figure out who it was, but their answers all conflicted so classes just went on as usual. Tragedy struck the very next night when Mrs LaRoche was found in the hallway, unconscious and bleeding.

"Students are not to walk the halls alone," the announcer went on over the PA system, "until whatever is causing these incidents is found and stopped. Anyone who has seen anything, or had any dreams about things, or has contacts in Heaven that could be useful please speak to a teacher immediately."

"So what do you think it is?" asked Yasui, bouncing into a chair at lunchtime. "It must be a demon, right?"

"Don't be stupid," replied Christina, "what demon could smash every lightbulb in a whole dorm and not get caught with all these *seers* around?"

"I don't know, but what else could it be?"

"Have you heard anything about Mrs LaRoche?" I asked.

"Last I heard, injuries were very bad," replied Osman. "Do not want to heal for some reason. And she is still unconscious."

We all hung our heads. None of us had taken any instruction from her as Mrs LaRoche taught *seer* skills, but we still felt bad for her.

"You know that beautiful girl everyone's been talking about seeing?" Yasui went on after a minute. "I saw her in class today! It was so weird, she was in a nightgown, and she walked in after like ten minutes of class. The teacher was all like "why aren't you dressed young lady?" but then she said "wait, who are you?" The girl just vanished after that- poof! Not a *teleport*, that makes a noise, she was just there then not-there. Oh, and she's way prettier than me, that's for sure."

## DUE PROCESS

“What?” I asked. “How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know,” she replied, “but it’s true. She was so perfect, like she wasn’t even human, you know? But I don’t think she was an angel, she looked confused and scared before she vanished, and I don’t think angels are big on confused and scared.”

“No they are not,” said Osman.

“We should investigate after classes,” said Katrina, who was suddenly sitting right next to us.

“Gwha!” I shouted, jumping away a little, “whatza?” She put her hand over her mouth and giggled. “I guess it worked.”

The people close to us just looked at us funny and went back to their conversations.

“Katrina?” asked Yasui hesitantly. “Is that you?”

She smiled. “It’s me all right. I’ve been practicing my power of *illusion*, oddly it doesn’t tire Osman out as much as my *sending* does, so I’ll probably use it from now on.”

“You look so real! Is that what you really look like?” I asked, looking her up and down.

“I don’t know, I guess. I just placed the idea in your minds that I was sitting there in a school uniform, so here I am.”

“So we’re the only ones that can see you?”

“That’s right.”

“Wow. That’s great, Kat, I’m glad I’m not the only one learning cool things here.”

Yasui laughed. “You should see what I’ve been working on!”

“Oh? Why don’t you go ahead and show us?”

“I don’t know, you know we’re not supposed to use our powers without supervision.”

“My feeling on that is, you see all the *seers* around here? In this very room?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“If something dangerous was going to happen, one of them would already know and come tell us about it. But they’re not, so I would think it was perfectly safe.”

“I guess that makes sense. Okay, I’ll show you but just for a second, and no, you’re not seeing double.”

I gave her a questioning look, but she just stood up, looked around, then walked out the cafeteria door.

“Her big technique was leaving the room?” I asked, confused. “Doesn’t seem all that impressive to me.”

I was watching the door and she came back in. I shrugged at her and she pointed to the other entrance on the right wall, where she was coming in again. I did a double take as two separate but identical Yasui girls came up to me. Osman was staring hard at them, probably trying to figure out which was the real one, as she sauntered back over to us.

“Hi Dean,” said the first one.

“Hi Dean,” said the second one.

“Okay, you have to teach me that,” I stammered.

The two looked at each other.

“It’s really supposed to be a secret, family technique,” said the first.

“But I suppose if you ask nicely, I could be persuaded to teach it to you,” finished the second.

“Is it some kind of *illusion*?” asked Katrina.

They both picked up something off the table, switched it, and set it back down.

I felt one, then the other. “They’re switched all right. There’s really two of you.”

“It’s a *spirit clone* technique. I was trying for two, but oh well. Thing is... well, hit me.” said one.

“I’m not going to hit you!” I protested.

“Oh don’t be a big baby and just hit me. Christina would do it, wouldn’t you?”

“Hit you?” she answered, finally joining our conversation even though she had been at the table the whole time. “Not a problem,” and punched Yasui right in the stomach. The clone disappeared, and the remaining Yasui sat down in her seat again.

“Okay, well, you guys tie for coolest thing learned, unless you can wow us more than that, Christina, or Osman, and just *petitioning* something doesn’t count.”

“I understand,” said Osman unhappily. “Because summoning literal agents of Heaven just isn’t cool enough for you.”

“Don’t take it personally, it’s cool enough, just that we expect you to bring angels to earth, but we didn’t expect to see Katrina or two Yasui just now.”

“I know, I know.”

“So what can you wow us with Christina?”

“Oh, I’d wow you all right, but I can’t do it here. Unless you want me to break every cell phone, watch, clock, laptop or other electronic device around here.”

## DUE PROCESS

“See, now that’s the kinda power I’m talking about,” I said excitedly. The others looked at me a bit funny. “About dangerous things that should be done under supervision.” They nodded. *Whew*. “Now what did you say before- oh yeah, we should research this? And don’t think you’re off the hook, we’ll see your electronic device breakage power later.”

“Sure. Everyone’s talking about it, and thinking it’s some kind of demon or ghost or something. Let’s assume it’s not one of those things and look up what else it could be,” said Katrina.

“That could work,” said Osman. “If it was demon, someone here would know, after all every teacher is demon expert, no? At least the *holy chosen* and *summoners*, I am thinking. So you are right, let them look up that sort of thing, we will look where no one else does.”

So it was decided, and that evening we all went to the library and started poking around. Of course it looked like a lot of other people had the same idea, as the place was pretty crowded, for once. We wandered the stacks of books and wondered what places people hadn’t already looked at, when Christina looked over at the PCs. They were unused.

“Why don’t we look on the internet?” she suggested.

“Because only- This has to be a- Can you find supernatural stuff on the *web*?” I answered back, at a loss. “The Foundation censors stuff like that, right? I mean there’s our general Foundation website, that anyone that went to school here can access. But the teachers would already know anything contained there, right? I guess we did want to look where no one else was.”

“This could be something new, something not in any of these books, but happening other places and we don’t know about it because no one looked there! Maybe there’s even blogs about it!” said Yasui excitedly. “Christina, you’re the best!”

“That goes without saying,” she said as we gathered around the machines.

“Okay, so what do we search for?” I asked as we all sat down.

“Just put some words in and we’ll see what comes up,” Yasui suggested.

“Most stuff happens at night, so put in nighttime,” said Osman.

“Something made those claw marks in our dorm, attacked a teacher and possibly some kid no one knows, maybe ‘monster?’” said Christina.

“I think there was a deeper purpose there,” said Katrina, appearing beside us and leaning over my shoulder to see the screen. “Think about it. Something broke all the lights in the girl’s dorm. Something put scratches in the door. But nothing’s been seen doing any of those things.”

“So it’s invisible?”

“No, I think it’s trying to scare us. At first it could only do little things, but now it’s up to attacking a teacher, which has made even more people afraid. I mean look at them all in here looking stuff up. I think that will make it even more powerful.”

“All right, so ‘fear’ goes in the list. You think it’s feeding on fear?”

“I guess we’ll know tonight if something even worse happens.”

“That’s a grizzly thought. So, anything else?”

“See what comes up with just that,” said Yasui, so I hit the return key.

“Well, result number one looks like some article on a kids’ psychology website, skip?”

“No, no, look, it has all the search terms, read it.”

I shrugged and clicked the link, skimming the article.

“This is ancient,” I exclaimed. “Was there even the internet back then?”

The article was in fact from an archive of old magazine articles from the Children’s Journal of Metal Health, issue 231, June, 1989. Apparently, a Dr Ransbottom wanted to prove to his daughter Sadye that “monsters under the bed,” which she claimed to see all the time, were not real. Sadly it seemed that all he proved was that he couldn’t prove it one way or the other. Strange things happened around Sadye when she was asleep and alone (and being filmed) but not when she was asleep and someone was in her room with her. No image of any kind was captured of the “man made of shadows” she claimed to have often seen, so any other phenomenon were explained away or ridiculed as a fabrication of the doctor himself. The last few lines were the most chilling:

*What conclusions can we draw from this? If they exist, perhaps night walkers somehow feed off fear, and thus stay near children who are easily frightened. They only appear to children, and only are seen, briefly, upon waking from sleep. No record of children being killed by “monsters” has ever been recorded, though of course there have been unexplained causes of death since time began. Are they just the product of a child’s imagination? Or does something dark really live “under the bed?”*

We stared at the article for several minutes, then started looking at each other to see who would be the first to speak.

“Uh,” I managed.

## DUE PROCESS

“Yeah,” said Osman back to me.

“Wait,” said Katrina, “isn’t there some “big book of unexplained crap” around here someplace? The Foundation knows monsters exist, they’re called ‘demons.’ This would have been investigated, even that long ago, the Foundation’s been around for longer than that.”

“Yeah, there must be something,” I said slowly.

“Wait, I know!” said Yasui, sitting down next to me. “Now that we have something new to look into, we can use the Foundation website, like you said, Dean.”

She typed in the address and brought it up, then logged in with her password. “What were they called again? There’s a search function here for certain Foundation reports, I’ll put it in.”

“Night walkers” I said, scrolling to the top of the article again.

She did some more typing, then smiled. “There’s an entry, come look.”

*Sadye was observed by seers and found to have no special powers to warrant her admission to Demongate High. She was found not to be supernaturally aware, so how could she see something others couldn’t?*

*Interestingly, there is one demon, Kalfu, that if seen by a child would be described as a “man made of shadows.” However, there is no way Kalfu would hang around a child’s bedroom without either trying to kill the child or at the very least leaving for someplace more interesting almost immediately. Thus, it is highly unlikely this phenomenon is related to demons or Kalfu himself, given the difficulty of summoning him to our world. Also, Kalfu is not unseen and thus would show up on film, though as just a black smudge if anything.*

*Seers, ESPers, and petitioners who have children have been contacted about this behavior but nothing amiss was ever sensed. However, these children did not report actually “seeing” any “monsters” at least as much as Sadye is said to have.*

*If there is some kind of unseen creature causing or feeding off these children’s fear, why has no supernaturally aware person ever seen one?*

*Could children be perceiving souls moving through purgatory? If so, how? Why only upon waking from sleep? And why lose this ability as they aged?*

*Classification: Unsolved*

“Oh crap,” said Christina. “Could something they dismissed actually be real and somehow stalking the halls of the school now?”

“Double crap,” I replied. “If both this and Katrina are right then it really is feeding off fear, and tonight it’s going to be even stronger. Maybe strong enough to kill.”

**Creature of the Night**

*Dreams, dreams, dreams! I got me a lot of dreams!*

“So you’re saying this night walker creature could be real, and it’s been causing the weird stuff that’s been happening?” asked Mr Chen, an *in-heritor*, who was the first teacher we saw in the halls after leaving the library. He looked again at the printouts we had made, both of the original article and the Foundation notes we found. “Humm, 19 years ago, I would have been about 50 at that time. I do seem to recall something about children being tested, or was that something else? Anyway, we’re collecting every possible lead so I’ll make sure the principal gets this information. Hopefully something will pan out, and this matter can be put behind us. Go back to your dorms now. Thank you for bringing this to me though.”

“Is there anything we can do to help?” I asked.

“You are first years, are you not? Yes, well, we’re going to have some older students and teachers patrolling all the hallways tonight, so I do appreciate your enthusiasm. I think it’s better to leave this to more experienced hands, yes?”

We nodded sullenly.

“Do not despair. In just a few short years it will be you who are called upon to guard the younger students, just as the older students are doing for you now. Your time will come. Don’t worry.”

We thanked him and headed back to our dorms, but Yasui was still uneasy.

“We have done all we can,” Osman insisted. “What more can we do?”

“There must be something else we can do,” insisted Yasui, pouting. “I’m afraid something big is going to happen tonight.”

“Great, feed it more why don’t you,” sneered Christina.

“You know what I mean!”

“I’d offer to stay in your room awhile, but I don’t think even in this circumstance the hall monitors would take kindly to it. And with all those people patrolling like they said, we’ll never sneak up there.”

“If you hear us screaming, come running, okay?”

“Come running? You girls are the fighters in this little group, remember? More like if you hear *us* screaming, *you* come running.”

“Oh yeah,” said Yasui. Christina just looked smug.

“There may be something else we can do,” I said as we walked back to our room. “We know the name of the girl in the original study, let’s see if we can write her an e-mail and ask if her dad did any more research on these night walker things!”

Osman agreed it would be a good idea to try, so we fired up his laptop and poked around the internet. We found several people with that name on Facebook.

“So who do we ask?” wondered Osman.

“I think I can help,” said Katrina, appearing next to us. “I’ve been practicing my *premonition* skills, so I’ll just use that to help us determine which person to contact.”

“Sounds good. What exactly should I do?” I asked. I had studied *postcognition*, that is, seeing the history of an object or person I was touching. I was told with the vagueness of *premonition*, only people that could master it should make the attempt, so I hadn’t tried. I had to save something for my second year here, after all.

“Just write the e-mail as normal,” said Kat, “and get ready to send it. I’ll use *premonition* on Osman and see if he’ll get a favorable result sending it.”

That seemed straightforward enough, so the three of us sat and composed a message to Sadye, which ended up like this:

*Dear Miss Ransbottom,*

*I am writing with regard to the study your father conducted in 1989 to explain the existence of creatures he called night walkers. People at my school have been seeing weird things and some scary things are happening we can’t explain. If you or your father have any insights you’ve gained after the paper was published in June, please contact us as soon as you can, because we think it’s getting stronger.*

## DUE PROCESS

“Is good,” said Osman, reading it over. “It does not name the school or where we are, and is enough I hope to convince her we read about her and are not playing trick.”

After that we worked out the three best people to send it to, and away the message went.

We tried to sleep, but every little noise had us jerking up, so I tried to do some reading but found I couldn’t concentrate on that either. Katrina even tried to entertain us with some fantastical *illusions*, but her heart (such as it was) just wasn’t in it, and too soon she faded away back into Osman. Time seemed to be stopped, and I think I nodded off because the next thing I knew, Osman was shaking me.

“Katrina says something is coming, and I see commotion over in girl’s dorm right now. We should get over there!”

“You can see that far?” I asked, astonished. He stared to answer but I cut him off. “Never mind that now, let’s go!” We both grabbed our coats and pounded down the stairs to the ground floor. An older boy shouted after me, but I didn’t stop to explain. I shouted back over my shoulder “it’s an emergency!” and kept running. It took me two tries, but I managed to get my *spirit projection* out on the run between the buildings, and then started drawing energy from my *talisman*. We raced into the girl’s dorm and Osman pointed up the stairs, where I could hear the sounds of battle. Were we too late?

Rounding the corner we stopped and stared in amazement as the hallway was pure chaos. I tried to take it all in, but everything was happening so fast it was hard to follow. Students were cowering with their eyes closed, while others battled seeming nightmares. Spiders, clowns, one girl seemingly trapped in a glass tank, underwater, while she pounded on the glass trying to get out. I also noticed there were no lights on here, so it was hard to tell exactly what was going on. Several girls were battling something dark further down the hall, but it didn’t seem like they were winning. We needed to throw some light on the situation, but looking up I realized all the lights in this hallway were broken, so what could I do? Osman took one look at the girl in the tank and the side furthest away from her burst apart, sending water cascading out and letting her get a breath again.

“I’ll take care of her, see what you can do!” he shouted at me over the din from down the hall, and ran over to help smash more of the tank so she could get out.

I looked around for something to do, but without light-  
*Of course, I thought to myself, I know a way to create some light!*

I concentrated and activated my *elemental aura*, a technique I learned from a *cambion* who could cover himself in fire. Turns out my element was electricity, but it still got the job done in this case. It seemed lighting surrounded me, lighting up the area. This of course revealed the shape further down the hallway that I managed to get just a glimpse of as it grabbed someone and threw them at me. This forced me to turn the aura off again before they hit me and were electrocuted. We went down in a heap and struggled to get up again.

“Osman, is that you?” said a voice as my beaver spirit helped pick the girl up.

“I’m Dean, is that Yasui?”

“Oh, sorry Dean, can’t see you very well. You did that light show just now?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know. Most people that get a good look at that thing either fall back screaming like it’s the scariest thing they’ve seen or some fear appears to harass them. I’ve got to get back and fight that thing, we don’t seem to be hurting it but we have to try! Wait, do you have a flashlight?”

“Yeah, in my pouch, but that thing can smash bulbs, look.” I pointed to the ceiling.

“I know but we need the light, and I don’t want to risk my phone.”

“Where’s Christina? I could shoot it but my aim is pretty bad. I don’t want to risk hitting someone.”

“She disappeared right off, I don’t know, she should be around here somewhere. Look around. I’ve got to get back.”

I grabbed her hand, pulling her back. “Wait, I’ve got a *ward* for you, slap one on whoever’s fighting with you!” I put my hand into my bag, said “acceleration *wards*” and felt paper on my fingers. I pulled one off, sent some spirit energy into one, and slapped it on Yasui’s back. She seemed to blur and grabbed the others out of my hand before I could react.

“Thanks that’ll be a big help.” she said, almost too fast to follow, and zipped off down the hallway. As she got near she leapt at the creature, boots first, and I heard it laugh as it brushed her off.

*Great, I thought to myself. Yet another instance when learning the light ward would help me out. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to pick it up. But at least my wards can help out indirectly, even if I can’t directly.* I glanced around at the people huddled in the hallways to see if Christina

## DUE PROCESS

was one of them, but she wasn't. I did notice a weird grey box sitting there in the hall, and had a sudden feeling someone might be trapped inside. I ran over to it.

"Is there someone in there?" I shouted, pounding on the top.

"Dean?" a scared voice said from inside.

"Yeah, it's me, who's in there? I'm going to see if I can get you out."

"It's me, Christina. Oh, I've been so scared, thank goodness you're here. Please, please get me out of here."

"I'll try," I answered, wondering how I was going to do that exact thing. The box was small, barely able to hold a person I thought, so just blasting it open would probably hurt her by accident. She would be hit no matter how carefully I aimed. I ran my hand over the edges of the box, looking for a lock or clasp but it seemed solid metal. Way too heavy to affect with *transmogrification* or *transmutation* I thought, unless I wanted to be here all night slowly cutting it away a nickel sized hole at a time.

"I don't think I can affect something like this," I shouted to her. "Not without hurting you too. You're the *spirit energist*, can't you blast your way out?"

"Can't... breathe," she managed.

*How long has she been in there?* I thought. *Oh, this is bad, this is very bad.*

There was only one chance- the box was obviously some kind of metal, like steel, so with that in mind I put my finger on the top and sent power through it. I had judged it correctly, as the finger went through, making a hole exactly big enough for one finger. But that was all I needed- The box wasn't that thick, I could wiggle my finger inside it now that I had punched through. I smiled, now that I could touch the air in the box I could affect it, which I did, picturing it as turning from carbon dioxide to oxygen again. I stood for a second, willing the air inside the box to become breathable, and heard Christina gasp and cough as the air around her cleared up.

"Is that better?" I asked through the hole after withdrawing my finger.

"Yes, thank you. I'm a little calmer now, so I'm going to try getting out of here. You better step back."

"Good luck."

A second later my mouth dropped open as a tremendous tearing sound filled the hallway, stopping the combat raging at the other end of the hallway. Everyone nearby, including me, was knocked over and the box was literally torn apart. Three sides of the box were immediately blown apart, leaving only the top and one side partially intact, which were flung to

the ground. As I struggled to rise, I saw Christina, lit up even more than I was with my lighting aura active, get up and manifest her bow. She looked down the hallway at the creature, now totally revealed in her light, and drew an arrow.

As I looked at it I got the sense that it was man shaped, but apart from that, it was just blackness against the glare of Christina's power. It was hissing and edging away from the light she was casting down the hallway, and it radiated a sense of hatred and anger at this new source of illumination.

"This is the forth level of *spirit grade*" she said calmly, "I hope you enjoy it." Then she let the arrow fly.

The creature, shading where it might have eyes with one arm, tried to dodge, but it really had no chance. The arrow impacted it right in the chest and tore it apart, making it vanish before our eyes. Looking around I saw the other nightmarish things around me vanish, apart from the things that were obviously real like the metal of the box and the glass tank.

Christina looked around for a moment, and apparently satisfied the threat was over, returned to normal again, smiling.

"That," she said, "felt very, very good. Is anyone hurt?"

The pressure that seemed to be keeping me down on the ground faded as she said this, and I unsteadily got to my feet again. I saw the people that had been cowering and covering their eyes start to look around, and a couple of unbroken light bulbs came to life again. The area was bathed in a faint glow.

"You win," I said to her, looking around to see if there were people I could help heal. "Was that what you were going to show us?"

"Partly," she answered. "Like I said, that was the fourth level, I've only practiced up to the third, so I wasn't sure it would work. But that thing put me in a box, so after you came I stopped being scared and got angry enough that I thought I would try it."

"I'm glad you did," said Yasui, taking off the *ward* and watching it burn away. "Now can you tell me why you could hurt it and we couldn't?"

Christina shook her head. "No clue."

Suddenly a door banged open down the hall, and a girl in a nightgown fearfully looked out. She dropped to her knees and started crying, and all she could say as the teachers led her away to the infirmary was; "It wasn't a dream. It wasn't a dream."

## DUE PROCESS

The next day dawned sunny, in contrast to the dark creature we had seen the night before, and I sleepily made my way over to the girl's dorm before classes started. I saw most of the damage caused by the creature was still there, and several teachers were poking around, presumably trying to figure out what had caused it. I knocked on Yasui's door, and she answered.

"Good morning, Dean."

"Just wanted to make sure you were both all right."

"We are, thanks for coming to check on us."

"Is Christina around?"

"Why- oh, that's why you really came over here, you want to hear about that thing she did last night."

"I, uh, well," I said, unable to deny it.

Yasui laughed. "She thought you might. She told me to tell you that it's like Osman's eyes, either you have the capability to do it, or you don't. So unlike my *spirit clone* technique I don't think you can do it."

"Well, that's a bummer. Oh well, at least I tried."

"See you at lunch," she said, pushing me out the door.

"I am glad you're okay," I said over my shoulder.

"I know."

So I walked back to my own room to see if Osman was ready to go eat, and heard voices on the other side of the door. *Is Katrina practicing something?* I thought. *It doesn't sound like her.* I double checked the room number and opened the door to find a woman I'd never seen before standing there. She had long brown hair, green eyes, and a rather longish face, with a high forehead. Pretty though. She was wearing a white sweater and jeans, and looked at me with interest, smiling. Osman was edged away from her and looking a bit freaked out, so I started putting energy into a *barrier* when it dawned on me- I had seen this woman before.

"Sadye Ransbottom?" I said, shocked.

"Oh hi, are you his roommate?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah, how did you get here?"

"She- She came out of... of the computer," stammered Osman. "She can't be here."

"You do remember where you are, right?" I asked him. "Expect the bizarre." I turned to her. "So thanks for coming, I guess. I'm Dean, this is Osman if he hasn't said yet and may I ask what he meant by 'she came out of the computer?'"

“Nice to meet you,” she said, stretching out a hand, which I took. “It was the only way I could think of to find you, piggyback on a return e-mail and come out when it was opened.”

“Uh, Osman, you can tell things about people by looking at them, right? Can you just, I don’t know, check her out a little bit?”

He didn’t answer so I looked over at him, he was just staring at her. “Uh, Osman?” I turned back to Sadye, “Sorry, it was a rough night, I think you may have fried his brain a little. He’ll be fine in a little while.” *I hope.*

She nodded. “Still, he’s not as freaked out as I might have thought. Who are you people? Your uniforms look military.”

“One second, please, if you’ll just indulge me. Katrina?”

She appeared beside me. “She can’t see me, I’m just projecting to you. What Osman said is true, he got an email back from Sadye with an attachment, which he opened. When he did, she literally popped out of the computer. That was about thirty seconds before you got here. I don’t sense anything evil or deceitful about her, but you better be careful. I’ve done a *sending* to Mr DeLefeu who should be here in a few minutes. My advice; stall her until then, if she can digitize herself or whatever, think what else she could do. So be careful.”

I nodded slightly. “Sorry about that, just had to check something. Please, sit down and we can compare notes.” I pulled a chair out from my desk and motioned her to sit, while I sat opposite her, by Osman, on the bed.

She was looking around. “Who’s Katrina?”

“That’s not important right now. What is important is how you’re able to do what you do, and what you know about the fear creature we killed last night.”

“Fear creature?” she said, alarmed. “You fought one? How many died? I’m so sorry I didn’t get here earlier, if only I’d checked my e-mail last night!”

“It’s okay, no one died. A friend of mine put an arrow through it and blew it up. It shook a lot of people up, but everyone’s okay. Well, I haven’t heard about the teacher it attacked a couple of days ago, but hopefully she’s fine by now too.”

Sadye just stared suspiciously at me. “What did it look like?”

“I only caught a glimpse of it myself, right at the end. It was dark in the hallway at the time, you understand. But it was a man shaped, dark, thing.”

## DUE PROCESS

“Was it more like a mist or a solid shape?”

“It was solid, a friend of mine kicked it a bunch of times, to little effect. It struck but didn’t do any damage. Only another friends’ powered up arrow hurt it, and thankfully she put enough energy into it to one-shot the thing before it could do more damage.”

She was shaking her head. “No, that’s not possible. A bunch of kids taking on a *nightmare* and living to tell the tale? Who are you people?”

“We’re the ones who keep the world safe from stuff like this,” a voice said at my door, “so anything you can tell me about these creatures would be greatly appreciated.”

We both looked over and Mr DeLefeu was standing there. I stood up and introduced Sadye, telling him how we had contacted her based on the research we had done the night before.

“Yes, Shenbo said something to that effect last night, I guess it paid off. May I ask how you came to be here?”

Osman had recovered by this point and spoke up. “She came out of the computer.”

“Interesting,” said Mr DeLefeu, “I think you and I are going to have a long talk.”

**Enemies**

*There's a new playa in town*

All of us involved in the attack, the students from the “out of time” busses and a bunch of teachers were called to a special assembly after classes that afternoon. Sadye and Mr DeLefeu were up on stage, along with a couple of other kids who looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Right, everyone here?” he began. “So I know you have a lot of questions, about the attack, what the creature was, etc. I hope I can answer most of them right now. Most importantly, there’s a new power type you’ll be seeing around the school, what we’re calling “*dreamers*,” and the pin will probably look like this.” He switched on the projector beside him and a shape that suggested an eye both opened and closed at the same time was shown behind him. He switched it off again. “Apparently this power has been around for some time, but only a few people really dedicated themselves to learning how to use it. In addition, most effects of it fade pretty quickly, so that’s why we’ve never seen it before. Also it seems somehow ‘immune’ to *seers*, even knowing this *dreamer* power exists doesn’t help our *seers* pick people out who have the ability. Only another *dreamer* can do that.

“This is Sadye, Miss Ransbottom to you.” There was tittering in the seats. “She and her father have been researching this power in secret since she was born so there’s really no better *dreamer* on Earth right now that she knows of. She’ll be helping us from now on so that what happened last night doesn’t happen again. In short, Sadye and other *dreamers* like her can step from their dreams into reality and then control reality as though it was their dream.”

There was a murmur of excitement in the auditorium, *an ability like that would dwarf even me*, I thought. People started whispering excitedly to

## DUE PROCESS

those nearby, and Mr DeLefeu held up his hands for quiet. “Much like a Spirit Hunter leaving their body to gain power, they become vulnerable when they do this because they are asleep, plain and simple. But I can’t deny the things I saw Sadye do, and the creature that attacked the girl’s dorm last night made it clear we need help.

‘Incidentally, the student we found killed a few days ago didn’t actually exist- it was a dummy made to look real by the emerging creature to further spread fear in the school. Sadye thinks it came into existence because there are now so many untrained *dreamers* at the school all at once, all adding their “dream energy” together unknowingly. That is why it got stronger so rapidly. She’s only seen a creature like that once, but apparently there is a less powerful version of it that’s much more common. She heard a rumor about a more powerful version appearing once, so you can imagine we’re eager to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

“Now, what does this have to do with the busses that got stuck in time? I had a hunch, and had Sadye test every student from the buses, and there was a *dreamer* on every one of them. Sadye thinks the place the busses went was created by a *dreamer* and somehow reacted to the students on the bus, drawing them in. She’s collapsed the space so that won’t ever happen again. How it stuck around in the first place she can’t tell us, as the *dreamer* that made it must be long dead by now. That seems to imply even she doesn’t know everything about the power, so we’ll be learning together.”

“That explains a lot,” I whispered to Osman.

He nodded back. “It felt kind of like a dream, now that I think on it, and the weird space effects we saw? I can believe it.”

“So in the coming days she’ll be testing everyone at the school to find all the *dreamers* and make sure they learn proper control at least. Meanwhile, we’ll try to figure out where this power came from and how it stayed hidden from us for so long. Meanwhile, keep in mind that while Sadye is here, her body is asleep somewhere. If she wakes up, she disappears from here- don’t be surprised if that happens. She says time runs somewhat funny between dreams and reality, so she can never really say when she’ll stop Dreaming. What may be fifteen minutes for her body could be eight hours for her Dreaming self, so we’ll have to do the best we can for her classes. As you know, dreams don’t last that long, and she’s no exception. Her body dreams on its own schedule, she just goes along for the ride.

“Now, the *nightmare* creatures. She obviously can’t patrol the halls every night, but they can be beaten. The key is light, that’s why it smashed all those lightbulbs up. Anyone fighting one should only hit them with glowing weapons, or elemental energy. Light itself only makes them uncomfortable, so a flashlight won’t do it. A sword that’s on fire would. Keep that in mind should any more be attracted or generated around campus. I’ll have the *alchemists* start creating some weapons made of sunlight that can be passed out in case of another attack.

“And now you know what I know about the situation. As you know, *seers* and *ESPer*s already have some dream related skills, but Sadye says there are some better techniques she can teach us, so don’t be surprised if you see her talking in your ability focused studies classes. She also says anyone can learn to better control their own dreams and may be running some after class activities to that end. Depends on student interest, and some other logistics stuff you don’t care about. There will be a sign up sheet hung on the billboard if you’re interested. That’s all for now.”

Yasui ran up to us as we left the building heading for the cafeteria to get dinner.

“That explains a lot,” she said.

We both nodded. “I said that very thing to Osman.” I replied.

“Think what you could do with a power like that,” she went on. “And we never even knew about it. Weird.”

“I don’t know,” said Osman. “That power might be nice, but to have to worry your very nightmares are going to come real and attack you? No thank you.”

“There is that. Do you think you could learn this *dreamer* stuff, Dean?”

I shrugged. “Depends on whether it’s more like *spirit clone* or Christina’s *spirit grades* I guess. I don’t know, I don’t like it. Power should be tied to the soul, so why can’t *seers* tell it’s there? It’s almost like it’s coming from somewhere else. I’m not sure what to make of it. And it has some drawbacks, imagine if *spirit hunters* popped back into their bodies at random times? They could be in the middle of a fight and \*poof\* they’re gone. I’ll stick to predictable *talismans*, thank you.”

“I guess you’re right. I just hope they figure it out, I don’t want to fight one of those things ever again. See you all later, bye Katrina!”

She ran off, and Osman turned to me.

## DUE PROCESS

"It raises question," he said hesitantly. "Did *seers* look at her dream body or her real one?"

I saw what he was getting at. "Right, technically she's just a normal girl that's dreaming. It just so happens she can step from wherever dreams happen into our world."

"Scary place, if dreams not happen in head."

"Hey you're right, we always assumed they did... This might change everything."

It was the last week of February when something weird started happening- again. I had learned the *spirit clone* technique from Yasui but was putting more effort into my classes than *talismans* at the moment. Not that I stopped reading about them, of course. The trouble started on Thursday when I sat down to lunch with my friends and saw a stranger sitting there. Then I noticed everyone looking daggers at me.

"What's up?" I asked, concerned, looking around at my friends.

"You've got a lot of nerve sitting here after what you said to Yasui last night Dean," said Christina coldly.

"Yeah," said Jonathan, "It was pretty harsh, even for you."

My head whipped around to look at this stranger sitting at our table. Dark hair, blue eyes, average looking. "Who-" I started to say, but as he looked at me, I remembered that Jonathan had been hanging around since I met him in my ability focused studies class a month ago. "Oh, Jonathan, hi, what are you all talking about? Did we even talk last night?"

"Don't try to weasel out of it by pretending it didn't happen," said Christina, putting an arm around Yasui's shoulders. "You really hurt her, you know?"

"Hurt who? Yasui, is this some kind of joke? I would never say something to hurt you, you must know that."

Looking at her, it seemed she was desperately trying not to cry. All she managed to say was "please leave, now," before turning away from me. Christina pulled her close and glared at me.

"You heard her. Now leave."

I was at a loss- I'm sure I just stayed in my room and read most of last night. I didn't recall even talking to Yasui at all. But rather than pursue it, I just picked up my tray and moved to another table. My thoughts were boiling, what was going on? Suddenly I heard a voice in my head.

*Dean, it's Kat. Something very weird is going on here, so don't despair. I'm not sure who this guy is that's shown up, but he wasn't around*

*yesterday, I'm sure of that. But he is an ESPer and I think he's doing something to them. We'll talk later when I can get away from Osman for a few minutes.*

I breathed a heavy sigh of relief, that was a load off my shoulders. I guess I wasn't losing my mind after all.

*An ESPer, huh?* I thought. *Guess I'll have to do some research.* I knew *ESPer*s could do a lot of things, but much of what they did, like Katrina's ability to create *illusions* in people's minds depended on getting good at other skills. In the case of *illusion* it was *sending* you had to know pretty well. After all, if you couldn't reliably put thoughts into people's heads, how could you do it with images? So I wasn't sure what skill would allow an *ESPer* to do what this Jonathan guy was doing. I resolved to find out.

"He came here a month ago," said Mr DeLefeu, who I immediately went to see after lunch. "He was late because of some family issues, but otherwise he's a pretty ordinary *ESPer*. Why do you ask?"

"I don't think he belongs here."

"What are you talking about Dean? Of course he belongs here, he's an *ESPer*, isn't he? And I seem to recall you hanging out with him in the past, talking about stuff, so what's the problem?"

"I remember hanging out with him too, that's the problem."

He looked at me for a moment, unsure. "Are you getting enough sleep?" he finally asked. "You're not buried in *talisman* making books all night, are you? Because you're sounding a little frantic."

"It's just-" I took a deep breath. "Yasui is mad at me, heck everyone is mad at me right now, and I don't remember why!"

"Well, he's just a first year student like you, and it takes years to learn *memory alteration* and besides, he's your friend, or at the very least an acquaintance. Why would he want to hurt you like that?"

"Well Katrina also said-"

"Dean, enough. I've been very patient but you're taking this too far. Go apologize to Yasui for whatever you said and try to work it out with her. Trust me, it's good practice for the future. As a man you'll always be in trouble with your female friends for one reason or another, even when you have no clue what you did, so just get used to it."

*Obviously this is going to get me nowhere, I thought. He's convinced everything is normal.*

## DUE PROCESS

“Okay,” I said. “I just thought you might like to know. After all, didn’t you once say to report anything out of the ordinary? It seems out of the ordinary to me, I reported it, that’s all.”

“And I appreciate it, I really do. If more people took that road I think things would go a lot smoother around here, but in this case I think you’re just overreacting.”

“I hear you. Thanks for listening.”

“Not at all, Dean, you know my door is always open. I’ll see you later.”

*So now what?* I asked myself, walking to my next class. *This might get tricky.*

I went through the rest of the day rather half-heartedly. It was driving me nuts that not only was our little group throwing me out, I had no way to convince anyone this Jonathan guy didn’t belong here, and I was innocent. I was laying in bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to think of a solution when Katrina came through the wall.

“Okay, he’s in the shower so I have a few minutes to talk,” she said, all echoey and far away sounding.

“Shower? How does it work with you in his- never mind. Why are you using *projection* instead of *illusion* like you normally do now?”

“I can only target someone with *illusion* that I can see. So I have to do it this way.”

“Oh, okay. So, Jonathan, you say he did something to the others?”

“Yeah. This morning he just walked up to each of them and started talking like he had known them forever. I felt him do something to them, and they acted like they knew who he was. But you see I don’t think he knows about me, so he didn’t target me and thus I still know seeing him today was the first time I actually met him.”

“Okay, something is going on then. I talked to the principal this afternoon, and he was convinced everything was normal. Even said he remembered seeing us talking together in the halls or whatever. I’ve got to prove he’s not a student here, but how?”

We both thought for a moment.

“There must be records of every student and their power kept someplace, right?” said Katrina. “For grading at least. I wonder if he changed those too? After all, if he just makes people think they put him into a computer, they wouldn’t check, at least for a while. And when they did I bet he would just cover that up when confronted.”

“You’re probably right. Shoot, how am I going to stop this guy? Especially if he can just change my memories whenever he feels threatened I’m on to him.”

“What’s he doing here is a better question. You don’t know him, do you?”

I shook my head. “Never seen him before, at least I don’t think so. I suppose if he can make me think I’m not meeting him for the first time right now, he could erase my memory of meeting him before now!”

“Wow, you’re right. You better write a bunch of this stuff down in case he messes with your head again.”

“I will. What could he want?”

“I guess we’ll just see if he’s around tomorrow and take it from there. Maybe he’s just an upperclassman messing with you using *illusion*?”

“No, I mean, I don’t think so. It would be pretty elaborate for a joke.”

Katrina gasped. “I just had a terrible thought. What if the principal is in on it? I mean, that whole field trip thing, right? We know they test students in various ways, maybe this is one of those. You know, solve the mystery?”

“I guess it could be anything at this point. I’ll assume he’s dangerous until I get to the bottom of this though. If he can mess with the principal’s head, he must be pretty powerful. Thanks for talking this out with me, I’m feeling better knowing I’m not going nuts.”

“Of course,” she said, blowing me a kiss. “I’m glad to help.”

She fuzzed, and was gone through the wall back to Osman.

*You picked the wrong guy to mess with, I thought, because I’m taking you down.*

The problem of course was how to do just that- I had no idea. His flawless infiltration of the school, his targeted attack on me, manipulating so many people. I knew he was much more powerful than I was so a straight up contest of powers would probably leave me dead. Which got me thinking about why he had singled me out in the first place, after all I had no enemies that I knew of. Could this have something to do with my parents? I couldn’t be sure, and without knowing his goal it would be doubly hard to predict his actions. Then that led into my wondering if my memory hadn’t already been tampered with, how would I know? I sat and thought as Osman returned and went to bed without speaking to me. Would have been nice if I could ask him, and I knew Katrina would back me up if I told him

## DUE PROCESS

my side of the story. I figured if this Jonathan wanted me off balance by turning my friends against me I would play the part for a while.

So the next day I looked into things that could break *memory alteration* and while there were *talismans* that could help defend against an ESPers' power, after something was done it was a lot trickier. I noticed he was still around, talking to my friends as though he had known them all along, and that other people were whispering to each other and pointing in my direction. Great, seems like he'd been busy yesterday too.

It was after classes that day that I was sitting in the library desperately trying to figure something out when a girl named Veta walked past me. She was an *alchemist* from India that I had worked with in my ability focused studies class when I was picking up my alchemy skills. Long black hair, dark eyes, her eyebrows seemed a little too long but that was okay. I hardly saw her walk by, I was so wrapped up in my thoughts, when suddenly an idea struck me.

"Hey, Veta, wait up! Do you have a second?"

"Oh. Dean, it's you," she replied a bit coldly. "What do you want?"

"Come on, he didn't get to you too, did he? Why is this guy trying to ruin my life?" I asked, looking up at the ceiling.

"What are you talking about? People have just been talking about your recent behavior and honestly I thought you were better than that Dean, so if you'll excuse me..."

"No, wait, please, I need your help," I pleaded. "This *ESPer* I've never seen before is trying to ruin my life for some reason and I need help to expose him. I don't know who else to turn to, my friends have all turned against me, but I think you can get me the proof I need to go to the principal!"

She paused. "So you didn't..."

"I don't even know what I've supposedly done. Katrina says he's using *memory alteration* on people and it's true, the principal had this whole story ready about how he belonged here and everything."

She seemed to think for a moment, looking me over. "All right," she finally said, sitting down, "why don't you start at the beginning?"

So I told her what happened at breakfast the day before and what Katrina had said to me, and while Veta looked a little skeptical, she agreed to help.

"But what can I do?" she asked. "I'm just an *alchemist*, if the principal says he's supposed to be here, I can't exactly turn him into stone or anything. I'd get in big trouble."

"It's not your powers I need right now," I explained, "it's evidence. He went ahead and put himself in people's memories, but I wonder if he bothered to change the computer records to match his story."

"So that's what this is about," she said, smiling at last. "You want me to hack into the school database and see if he's in there."

"Hack is such an ugly word, but yes, you told me you were really good with computers, right?"

"I've picked up a few things. I can tell you this much though, I'm pretty sure the student list is only on Mr Delefeu's computer."

"Oh," I said, eyes shining, "you've already tried to hack the school database then."

She colored. "I can neither confirm nor deny this allegation. But I may have conducted a basic network intrusion test, just to make sure the school's computers were safe."

I grinned at her. "I see how it is. What you're telling me is that we're going to have to get into the principal's office somehow to do this?"

"I could just open up a hole in the door with *transmogrification* but it might be warded against that sort of thing."

"Not to worry," I said, my eyes twinkling as I grabbed the *talisman* book I had been looking through earlier. "I think I've got that one covered."

She looked on with interest as I grabbed my specially prepared paper, twenty cents in nickels, a brush, and spirit ink out of my pouch.

"How did- never mind." She shook her head. "*artificers*."

"Oh, just wait," I cautioned her, "it's gonna get surreal in just a second."

She looked at me like I was nuts, but didn't say more.

I unfolded the piece of paper and set it on the table next to the book, which I had propped open to a diagram for a *phase talisman*. Given how useful this *talisman* was sure to be, it was certainly an easy one, as *talismans* went. Of course, that still meant hours of work for "lesser skilled" individuals. I closed my hand around the nickels and concentrated—first on a set of rings to hold the charm onto the chain, then on the charm itself. Naturally I picked the shape of a little ghost, which seemed appropriate. Luck was with me, for the rings anyway, they formed right away. The charm took me a few tries, but I managed it. I set the ghost in the center of the paper and told Veta to step back a bit.

"This is going to be a rush job, so we'll see how it goes," I told her. "I've never tried doing it this way before, but theory says it should work just fine."

## DUE PROCESS

“My *alchemist* teacher tells a lot of horror stories that begin with that phrase. You know, as examples of what *not to do*?” She was beginning to look like she was sorry she had stopped, and I started calling on the spirit of the ant. Several minutes later I had it, then called out as many *Spirit Clones* as I could. Putting in a tremendous effort I managed to call out five of them, which I figured was probably the highest number I would ever get, and now Veta’s eyes were just popping out of her head.

“Who are you?” she stammered. “You just- and then you- now there-”

“Deep breaths, Veta,” I said. “Keep it together now. You’ve seen me learning a bunch of different stuff in class.”

“Yeah, but to see you actually use it, what are all... you doing here, anyway?”

“Oh, that’s easy. I have the spirit of the ant assisting me right now, so I can help anyone with any skill, as that’s the special power ant conveys on people who call it. So now I’m going to assist myself in making this *talisman*, so I can get it done right now, rather than two days from now. Normally this *talisman* would take two solid days of work to not mess up, I’m going to try and do it in an hour.”

“Good luck,” she said, uncertain.

I got started drawing the spiral around the ghost, filling it with the symbols from the book, and taking the advice of my five clones to not mess it up.

Less than two hours later I energized the spiral and was rewarded with a new *talisman* that I clipped onto my left leg, next to the *regeneration* one. I could only use one at a time of course, but the *regeneration* one could stay on most of the time.

“Wow,” said Veta, impressed. “You really know your stuff, you just sat there and made that thing.”

I chuckled. “Thanks. I took a shortcut though, this *talisman* draws on my own *spirit energy* to activate. That makes it far easier to make than one that doesn’t, and my clones were a big help.” They all blushed appropriately. “Also only I can use it, making it even easier to create, so that’s how I was able to do it so fast. Of course if I messed it up...” I activated it and stuck my hand through the table and sure enough, it passed right through. “Nope, looks like it came out just fine,” I said. “Now, can it take both of us?”

I deactivated it and offered her my hand, which she reluctantly grabbed, and I activated it again. I stuck my head through a bookcase to make sure no one was on the other side, and we both walked through.

“Looks like that part works just fine too!” I exclaimed, pleased. Veta seemed impressed as well; She swiped her hand through the bookcase again, then touched me on the other arm, and I felt her hand like normal.

“Amazing! What would happen if I was halfway through the bookcase and you let go?”

“Ah, well according to the book you would probably get cut to ribbons and would be forcibly ejected to whatever side you were closer to.”

“Let’s not test that then.”

“So,” I said, walking through the bookshelf again and letting go of her hand on the other side, “are we on for tonight?”

“Exactly how much harder would it be to make one of those for me?” she asked.

I laughed, “I get it, you want one too, huh?”

“I wouldn’t mind one, for my trouble in helping you out and all.”

“I think I could manage it before tomorrow. You up for it fellows?” My clones nodded and I pulled out another sheet of paper.

“I think we have a deal.”

**The Operation**

*Dun dudda da dunn dunn dunn da dunn daada duun dunnn dunn*

The staircase was dark that next morning, but enough light came through the windows to let us see our way. We had both snuck out of our rooms and met at the main building at 2:00, and had carefully made our way to the tower where the office was. We were both jumpy and I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I had never done anything like this before. *If only I had been able to make an invisibility talisman as well*, I thought *I would be breathing a lot easier right now*. I hoped this worked, I didn't want to get Veta in trouble. Though as I had talked her into it, most of the blame would fall on my shoulders. I wanted to ask Kat to use her *precognition* to see if my efforts would be successful, but Osman was sleeping, and I couldn't wake her without waking him, so I was on my own.

"So how do we know the office isn't warded against this sort of thing?" asked Veta in a whisper, as we crept up the stairs, having made it without being spotted.

"I suppose we don't," I whispered back. "But really, I don't think he bothers too much with that."

"Why not? That would be pretty stupid, wouldn't it?"

I shook my head. "Think about it. Someone breaks into his office, right? He just goes and asks a *seer* who did it. They grab him out of class and ask him if he did it. That person lies, the *seer* says 'you're lying' and that's the end of it. But we aren't going there to cause trouble or steal stuff, we just want to prove this Jonathan guy shouldn't be here and that he's messing with people. So even if we do get caught, we can tell the truth *which looks good for us* and a further investigation will be started. Which is what I want to happen anyway. They might question my methods, but I'm confident of the result."

“Oh.” she said.

“So are you with me?” I asked, holding out my hand and pointing, as we were now standing outside the door to the office.

She nodded tightly and grabbed it. Her palm was hot and sweaty, and I figured mine was too; rationalizing this was all well and good, but what we were doing still could get us in trouble. Veta was taking a lot on faith, given how poorly she knew me. Maybe I just had an honest face? She had earlier argued she could use her own *talisman* to breach the door, but I argued one was less likely to be detected than two. She agreed, so we both used mine. I gestured off to the side, and she nodded, so we took a step to the left and passed through the wall, which I figured wasn’t as warded as the door would be. You see a door as the means to pass between rooms, not the walls. So why *ward* them?

We passed through with no trouble and were in the office in an instant. We both held our breath waiting for alarms or monsters or something to happen, but it didn’t so we just looked at each other with a little triumph in our eyes. I let go of her hand (after making sure she was not touching anything at all) and got out the flashlights and the case of disks she had me put in my pouch before we left. After all, it’s one thing to be caught in the halls with a girl, but quite another to be caught with a girl who had a bunch of hacking type CDs. At least I assumed that’s what they were. She made her way over to the computer and selected a disk.

“I’m going to boot the machine into *Ubuntu*,” she said quietly, making sure the speakers that were sitting there on the desk were switched off. “Hopefully the student list is just a spreadsheet or something and not a proprietary app.”

“You do what you have to do,” I said, not knowing what the heck she was talking about. She powered the machine on and opened the tray, slipping the disk inside. She hurriedly tapped a key, then selected the CD drive from a list on screen of possible boot devices.

“This way, even if his account is password protected, we can still get into his data and he’ll never know we were here,” she further explained, hitting the enter key. I nodded.

We waited.

And waited.

“How long does this take,” I hissed. “Will it happen any time soon?”

“Sorry, this PC is a piece of junk, and booting from CD always takes longer, just be patient. Has he not upgraded since the 2000s or what?”

“Humph, in movies when someone hacks a computer they just smash type the keyboard a little and it’s done in two seconds.”

## DUE PROCESS

“Well, I’m sorry this isn’t a movie,” Veta snapped. “At best it’s a crappy novel by some J. K. Rowling wannabe that the writer’s mom buys but no one else bothers to.”

“Please, this is my life we’re talking about here.” I protested, insulted. “At least make it a campy Broadway musical that gets terrible reviews and only lasts two weeks onstage.”

We both tried hard to not break into fits of giggling, it seemed now that we had made it this far, some of our nervous energy was leaking out. Finally the machine booted up.

“Okay, let’s see what we have here,” Veta said, becoming serious again. “Good, at least he doesn’t use full disk encryption, probably doesn’t even know it exists.” She clicked through a bunch of things and said “Yup, here it is.” She opened it and a program called OpenOffice showed on the screen, finally displaying a list of students. We scrolled through it and found our names, so it was the right list, but we found no student listed by the name of Jonathan. She slipped a flash drive into the USB port and copied it off. “We can print it out and bring it to someone,” she said, then asked if there was anything else.

“We’ve been here too long already,” I answered. “We have the proof that something weird is going on, let’s not push our luck.”

She nodded, and started turning the machine off. The disk slipped out and she put it back in the case, closed the drive, took out her flash drive and hit the power button. I put the case back into my pouch, along with the drive. “I’ll get this back to you after I’ve printed it.”

“We better split up after we get down the stairs.”

I nodded. “You won’t have any trouble getting back?”

She smiled. “With the *talisman* you made me? No door or wall can bar our way now, right? I should be fine.”

“Okay. Thanks for your help, I would *not* have been able to do all that.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay, I hope it all works out for you.”

We joined hands again and I gave it a little squeeze in thanks as we slipped out of the office. She squeezed back and once down the stairs we stealthily made our separate ways back to our dorms. I had to dodge through a wall to avoid someone seeing me, but the space I entered was empty, so I just waited a moment and he was gone again. He was patrolling for demons of course, or the more recent *nightmares*. You can’t be too careful when your school sits on a Demon World gate, but finding me would also have raised unfortunate questions. I got back to my room, through the door, and found Osman sitting up waiting for me.

He jumped a little, his eyes widening. “Did you just walk through that door without opening it?” he accused.

“Yes, I made myself a new *talisman*. Seems to be pretty handy.”

He paused. “You were out an awful long time.”

“I had to get something done, and let me tell you, it isn’t like in the movies. You weren’t actually worried about me, were you?”

“Worried you were getting into trouble, yes. What’s going on with you lately?”

“Aarg! Look, Osman, whatever you think you remember about my behavior is *wrong*. That Jonathan guy, he just showed up yesterday and all of a sudden I’m the bad guy. He’s messing with your memories, ask Kat, she’ll tell you.”

Katrina appeared in the room with us in *illusion* form. “It’s true, I wasn’t affected because he doesn’t know about me, but when you saw him the first time you asked who he was, then suddenly you were all buddy-buddy with him.”

“That’s impossible. I’ve known him almost as long as I’ve known Dean.”

“I felt him use *memory alteration* on you, brother mine.”

“That’s crazy, why would he do that? He’s a good guy!”

“Oh this is pointless,” I said, exasperated. “Look, you want to know where I was? Getting the evidence against him. He’s not a student here, the student list doesn’t show anyone by that name. I can show it to you if you want.”

“That won’t prove anything, you could easily have modified those records to say whatever you wanted.”

“Stop it, Osman, he’s telling the truth,” wailed Katrina, grabbing his arm.

“No, it’s okay,” I sighed. “This is why I went for the evidence first rather than trying to convince you all I’m right. *Obviously* a person is going to trust their own memories over the word of someone else, and this Jonathan knows his stuff if he can tamper with the memory of the principal and get away with it. Or maybe what Osman thinks about me is true, maybe I’m a horrible person who’s been implanted with the memories I have now. I can’t know at this point.”

“But-”

“I only have my memories to fall back on, same as Osman does. But I’ll make you a deal,” I said to him. “You give me the benefit of the doubt until I take what I found to Mr DeLefeu. If there’s just been some mix-up

## DUE PROCESS

and I'm the one going nuts, you can say I told you so and that'll be the end of it."

"Fine," said Osman shortly. "I just hope you're right."

I had forgotten to reset my alarm after my early morning jaunt so I woke up late, which was fine as it was a Saturday. However, Osman was gone and I didn't see him in the cafeteria, so I went looking for him. I needed Kat's testimony when I confronted the principal about Jonathan, as I figured his reaction would be nearly the same. I had the fantastic idea to use a *spirit clone* to help me look, so we could cover more ground. Soon enough I got a *sending* from my clone that my friends were all out behind the swimming pool, talking to Jonathan.

*Oh crap*, I sent back.

*Yeah, you better get over here.*

I took off running, activating my phasing *talisman* so I could get there more directly, and then ran around the right side of the pool building to where my clone was. I dismissed him and was surprised to learn that I knew everything he had heard them discussing. *Have to ask Yasui about that later*, I thought. It seemed bad to me, he was trying to convince them I was the one who didn't belong, not him, and that they should bring me in to get to the bottom of it. The trouble was- they seemed convinced. I had to get that evidence to the principal before things got even more out of hand. I turned to run back the way I came and saw Yasui standing there. *But she was there talking- oh, a spirit clone, great*, I thought to myself.

"He's here all right." she shouted, grabbing me. "Just like you said, Jonathan. Spying on us."

She marched me out to where the others were standing.

"Dean, Dean, Dean, what are we going to do with you?" asked Jonathan.

"What have you done to them?" I demanded.

"Me?" he asked innocently. "We're all just concerned about you, that's all. My friend Osman here said last night you gathered some fake evidence that I wasn't a student? Is that true? Tell me what you did last night."

"I don't have to tell you anything."

Jonathan looked surprised. "Don't you? It really would be best if you told me."

"I broke into the principal's office with Veta and looked at the student list. You aren't on it." *What am I saying?* I asked myself. *Why am I telling him this?*

*Be careful*, said Kat in my mind. *He's using compulsion on you right now.*

"Oh yes, you have some *ESPer* skills, don't you?" asked Jonathan. "But don't bother *sending* to anyone, I've taken steps to make sure we won't be disturbed here. I should have guessed you'd look into things immediately, but breaking into the principal's computer? Brilliant! I applaud you, Dean."

*What?* I thought to myself. *Oh, right, he doesn't know about Kat, so he sensed someone using sending and thought it was me. Got it.*

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Oh, just what my master commands, is all. Please don't resist, it'll just be that much harder for you."

I tried to resist, but I felt his will clamp around mine. Although I could escape easily by activating my *phase talisman*, I was helpless to do anything that would be considered "resisting." I did activate my *regeneration talisman* with a word, as I thought I might need it very soon. *That isn't resisting, right?*

"I had hoped to play with you some more," Jonathan sighed, "but I guess it's not to be."

"Wait, what are you—" Christina started to ask, but she didn't get to finish as Jonathan simply touched my head with a single finger, said "Your parents say 'hi.'"

And killed me.

My head literally exploded. I barely had a chance to even register the pain, which was tremendous, by the way, before everything went dark.

In my paranormal studies classes we had talked a little about death, and what happens to a soul when it dies. In the back of my mind I had this idea of dying that would lead me to either waking up being tortured by cruciatus in the Demon World or floating in the Heavenly Realms as a being of pure spirit. Neither happened. I woke up to find Yasui bawling her eyes out over me, as Osman and Christina tried to pull her away, probably to go get someone to clean up my remains. I made a gurgling sound trying to reassure her I was all right, which caused her to bolt upright and scramble away from me. She watched, horror on her face, as things became clearer and clearer, until finally I felt well enough to sit up, which I did.

"You're dead," she stammered, "your head exploded like a grape, I saw it. You can't be here. What are you?"

## DUE PROCESS

*Why do people keep asking me that?*

I looked over to find Christina standing over me with an arrow drawn, and her arms were trembling a little as she sighted down the arrow towards me.

“What happened to Jonathan?” I asked. Osman pointed past me, and there was a body, with what looked like both energy bolt wounds and crushing damage, no doubt Yasui’s work. But it wasn’t Jonathan. I looked back at him. “Who-”

“He turned into that when he died. It must have been a *ward* or something to disguise his appearance.”

“Oh,” I managed. “I was really hurt that badly?” I asked to Yasui.

They all nodded, causing me to shrug. “I did have my *regeneration* item active, that might have done it.”

They all shook their heads, but didn’t say anything.

“Come on,” I said, getting annoyed. “Christina, either shoot me right now, or accept what happened and let’s figure this out together. He was an *ESPer*, maybe it was just an *illusion* and a bit of *mind blast* to make me fall over.”

She stared hard at me for a moment longer, then released the tension in her bow and made the arrow disappear. “Care to explain?”

“I’m not sure I can. If you say I was that badly injured, my *regeneration* shouldn’t have saved me, it’s not fast enough. But here I am, and I feel fine, so there must be another explanation. What did that guy do to me, anyway?”

“He just touched your forehead, and your head just sort of burst like a grape. I was horrified, and something in me snapped, and Yasui went nuts as well...” she glanced over at Jonathan’s body.

“What kind of person can just kill somebody by touching them like that?”

“Someone who’s an *unholy chosen*,” said a familiar voice from around the corner. We all jerked our gaze in that direction and several teachers appeared, pulling off *wards* of some kind. “Nicely handled, everyone.”

“A *what*?” asked Osman.

“Just like there are *holy chosen*, people able to wield the power of Heaven on Earth, there are *unholy chosen*, made to do the opposite. Our *seers*, when they were not having bizarre visions of Charna, saw his arrival at the school and moved to prevent it. However, Mrs. LaRoche continued looking into it, and found that he somehow related to you, Dean, and that

letting him stay here would reveal a great secret that related to you. I guess we know what that secret was- tell me, do you have the egg on you?"

I think I was still moving a little slowly, what with my brain having regrown just a minute ago, so it took me a second to figure out what he was talking about. Suddenly it clicked and I undid the string on my pouch and stuck my hand inside. "Blue Egg," I said, and the familiar feel of the egg came into my hand, so I pulled it out. It was glowing.

"I thought so. May I see it please?"

I wordlessly handed it over and he concentrated on it, then looked to the other teachers and nodded.

"Now that it's active I can feel it, it's a *soul transfer* all right." He shook his head. "What were they thinking?"

He handed it back to me and the glow began to subside, until about twenty seconds later it had faded altogether.

"Apparently," he went on, "when you were a baby your parents placed your soul, at great risk I might add, into that egg. It is also a *talisman* designed to make sure it's not recognized as such. It's probably also been made nearly indestructible, if what I'm feeling from it is correct. Still, I would keep it with me or hide it very, very well, because if that egg does get destroyed, you die. As your body was just killed, it activated, keeping your soul on this plane rather than letting it migrate to wherever it was going, and letting me feel it for a few seconds. So now you know what it is, and probably why your parents disappeared- they went on the run after performing an illegal *soul transfer*. What bothers me is that they went to such great lengths to hide it, so afterwards why run away? No one would have known unless you were killed, it's all very odd. Oh, and I'm guessing it does at least one other thing, so your mother really put a lot of effort into it."

"What's that?"

"It makes you age. See, normally people go around putting their souls into something so they won't get any older. In your case, you were a baby, so you would have been stuck like that forever. Naturally they didn't want that, so this makes you age too. She must have spent months, or worked very, very fast. I suppose she could have had the transfer done, then worked on it, then left. If I see her some time I'll be sure to ask her."

"Wait, that guy, before he, well, killed Dean, he said 'your parents say hi,'" said Yasui. "What does it mean?"

"I'm not sure. I'll have the *seers* look into things more for you, Dean, you can be sure of that. I'm sorry for putting you through all that, but

## DUE PROCESS

we were pretty sure no harm would come to you. Mrs LaRoche asked “Will he come through the experience unscathed?” and she didn’t get a negative answer, so we figured the risk was minimal.”

“Wait, didn’t get a negative answer? That’s a weird thing to say.”

“Usually when a *seer* asks something like that they get an answer, as they are technically asking ‘the future’ or something. In any case, something answers them, and it’s usually right. We didn’t get an answer in your case, and decided to take that as a yes.”

“That was quite the risk,” said Christina coldly, “You put us all in danger to find this out, serious danger. If he had touched one of us- we aren’t so lucky as be immortal.”

Mr Pearson, her *spirit energist* teacher stepped forward. “You do realize we’re at constant war with the Demon World, right?” he asked. “They outnumber us thousands to one. Out of the 134 million or so people born every year, two hundred might have powers. That’s so small it might as well be zero percent. And those two hundred people have to keep those 134 million safe from demonic influence as best they can. So did we put you in danger? Yes. Because we are mean? No. Because we want you dead? No. Because we want, no we need you to be the absolute best you can possibly be? Yes.”

Mr DeLefeu lay a hand on his shoulder. “Now, now, it’s not as bad as all that. We were right here, after all. Our methods may seem harsh, but he is right. We do need extraordinary people to graduate from this school, and people’s abilities are usually tested to destruction. It’s better to see who has the stuff early on versus who doesn’t. You’ve proven yourself well this time, but your battles will only get harder from here. I hope you realize that.”

Christina grimaced.

“So these memories are false?” Osman asked, confused.

“Yes. Whatever he put in there, just try to ignore it. Dean here is the same hard working, polite kid he was before.”

“I’m sorry,” whispered Yasui. “I should have put more faith in you. But I didn’t, I thought you had said some- some awful things about me and the others and I just got so mad.”

“He was probably doing that too, with *emotional influence*. He seemed to have a very thorough mastery of mental powers. It’s a shame he was picked to do such evil work,” said Mr Nesbitt, an *ESPer* and the third teacher that had arrived.

“Oh,” she said even more softly. I walked over and hugged her.

“Don’t worry about it, everyone got taken in by him, that’s why he

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was sent. We'll get to the bottom of this, don't worry."

"That we will!" said Mr DeLefeu brightly, putting his arm across my shoulder. "Now, if you could just explain how you got into my office..."

*Wonder if I should tell him I made that Phase talisman for Veta too, I thought to myself.*

**Dealing With Dark Powers**

*Let me tell you about the evil of the nested macro*

“So that’s the story,” I said to Albert much later that afternoon. We had spent the morning with the principal and certain teachers, going over the details of what happened and what we thought had happened and such. We were sitting in the cafeteria now, the harsh lights above and background noise of the people around me only a small comfort after my recent brush with death. Yasui had earlier suggested we go someplace quieter to talk, like outside or the library, but right now I wanted people around.

“That’s quite the adventure you had,” he replied, impressed. “I’m sorry you had to kill someone though.”

Yasui and Christina looked away. “He was evil,” I said, looking back and forth between them, “Right down to the core. That’s why he was *unholy chosen*, if you get my drift.”

“Not now Dean,” said Christina, but Yasui gave me a weak smile.

“Is true,” said Osman, nodding. “I am glad his wicked ways no longer will pollute the Earth, and I’m sure any angel would say the same.”

“But why tell all this to me?” Albert asked.

“It’s one of those ‘it’s not what you know, it’s who you know’ situations,” I explained. “I’m worried about the state of my soul, quite frankly. The ritual my parents did is illegal for a reason, apart from how dangerous it is. I would like to hear, from an angel, that my soul hasn’t been tainted because of something that was done to me as a baby. If it is, what can I do about it? If it isn’t, that’s fine, I’ll just keep my soul in the egg and continue to be immortal for a while, until I figure out how to remove the power in the egg that makes me age. I could just have Osman here *petition* any old angel, as I don’t know any personally, but I thought I might get a better an-

swer if we called one you had already worked with. I figured in your four years of school here you might have learned about one or two that could give us a straight answer.”

“You’re right about that,” he answered after a moment. “I have met an angel or two, and now that I think about it, there is one that owes me a favor. We could get him here easily enough, but I don’t know how he’ll react to being pulled from his duties. As long as it’s only for a few minutes it should be fine. I think he’s an archangel, can you manage one of them?”

“I’m at least familiar with archangels, yes. They aren’t too far up the angelic ladder, so to speak, and if you know his name...” Albert nodded. “Good. With Dean’s help I can probably manage it, at least for a while.”

“How can he help? You can’t learn to *petition* very well, can you?” Albert asked me.

“Nope! I doubt I could learn to *petition* even a single angel, too difficult. How many have you learned, Osman? Three? And that’s doing nothing else but practicing *petitioning*?” He nodded sadly. “And I’ve made three *talismans*, a *ward*, learned a spirit, and can do alchemy stuff, and spirit energy- I don’t mean to brag!” I hastily added. “I just mean that I can never master most of that stuff without years of study, and Osman can just pull an angel out of the sky; something I’ll never do, and, well, uh, back on track then?” I asked hopefully. They all nodded. “Right, sorry. I think the *circle of petitioning* down in the *summoning* classrooms needs an *artificer* to activate it, so I can still be very useful. I’ll activate it for you, and you can get to *petitioning* this angel of yours.” I broke off and looked up, and everyone looked overhead to see what I was looking at. I jerked back. “Oh, hey, did you know? If I call on the spirit of the ant, then use *spirit clone*, both of ‘me’ then have that ability? I used that technique to make the *phase talisman*, it was pretty nice.”

“Your mixing of powers makes me dizzy, Dean,” said Yasui jokingly.

“Hey, right now I’m just sampling everything, you know, getting a feel for what I ultimately want to study. When you know you can’t take a skill very far it’s easy to learn a little about it then go on to the next thing. And the more I learn about how different people manipulate *spirit energy* the easier picking up new things will be, in theory anyway. Like learning a bunch of different languages. Right?” I looked around expectantly.

“So,” said Christina, ignoring me completely, “how long do you think it’ll take you to learn to *summon*, sorry *petition* this angel guy?”

## DUE PROCESS

“Honestly, I think I’ll have to get a little better at *petitioning* before I can even make the attempt. My *draw* probably isn’t enough to sustain him yet. Plus there’s the whole learning the ritual for archangels, which will take time, so it’ll be two weeks at least. Sorry.”

“No rush,” I said easily. “My soul is how it is, at this point. If there’s certain rituals or prayers I can perform to balance any taint, fine. I’ll perform them for as long as necessary. But I am immortal apparently, so there’s no rush. My soul isn’t going to go anywhere for the forceable future.”

So almost three weeks passed before Osman declared he was ready and we all tramped down to the *summoning* rooms. I had put most of my efforts into classes, but I did see a guy walking around with this sweet looking dagger. I asked him if I could borrow it to make a mold of it, and he said sure. Albert helped, okay he did most of the work actually, but in the end I had myself a copy made out of *concrete luminescent* sunshine. That’s what the principal had said other *alchemists* were making, in case more *nightmares* attacked. It was lucky for me, as they had all the ingredients and equipment already set up outside. I didn’t have to buy anything, as I was legitimately making a bladed weapon that was glowing, the only defense I would have against a *nightmare*. So they were happy to assist, and it turned out great.

I offered to mix it up myself, but he said I wasn’t good enough at alchemy to make a proper knife, and actually hitting someone with it would probably break it if I made it. So I mixed up the ingredients under his watchful eye, but he actually put the energy into it to make it solid. The original owner was pretty impressed, and I no longer needed a flashlight or a silly light *ward*. Of course while showing it off Christina reminded me even if it was for use against *nightmares*, I couldn’t just walk around with it. Weapons that were not *inherited* were not allowed on school grounds. Even the sunlight weapons the *alchemists* were making were secured in various places around the school, to be used at need.

At that point I just grinned and slipped it into my pouch. I told her it was fine, it was now inside another dimension, not on school grounds at all. She just rolled her eyes and walked away.

*There’s just no understanding girls*, I thought to myself.

It was past the mid-week of February, and the *seers* had come to me saying they had not found out anything new about my parents. Even some

*summoners* had asked demons for answers, checking up on the *unholy chosen* angle, but gotten nowhere. I had asked if I could question one directly, and they agreed. Mr Verochka was tagging along with us so he could *summon* something that might have the information we needed, after we talked to the angel. Albert was with us, lending us the sword and making sure the angel knew we were trustworthy. I was carrying twigs and some branches to make a fire, which I explained would help me summon the spirit of the ant. Spirits, it turned out, were attracted to flames, and every little bit helped. The *summoning* rooms were below the normal classrooms, in the basement of the school if you will, down where they kept all the perpetual motion machines.

Yes, I go to a school that has perpetual motion machines in the basement. I asked about them, and Albert told me it was sort of traditional now to try and make one someone had never thought of yet. Apparently a little less than fifty years ago an *artificer* made a small one as a joke to run a lava lamp, which had just been invented at the time. Then an *alchemist* worked on making a bigger one, and it just took off from there. Standing there, watching them wiz and buzz and bounce and roll I had to admit, it was pretty impressive.

“I love going to this school,” I said, a tear in my eye.

“Come on,” said Christina, pulling me away.

“No! Beautiful!” I wailed, one hand outstretched towards them.

“Oh, knock it off,” said Yasui, but she was smiling so it was okay.

We entered the practice room and I set up my twigs in one corner. Looking around I could see not much else was done to this place but hack it out of the ground, and it was easily ten meters tall. Osman explained this was because some angels and demons (he said that part grudgingly) were quite tall, so it had to accommodate them all. There were several circles chiseled out of the floor, each with a different purpose depending on what you wanted to happen. Some could restrain a demon so it could be studied, some made it easier to keep *summoned* things here, that sort of thing.

“This one is one for me using,” Osman said, pointing to one. He seemed to be a bit nervous, usually his English was better than this.

I snapped my fingers and put a little energy into a *combust*, setting the twigs on fire, then watched the larger ones catch. “Everyone ready?” I asked. They nodded back, and I started chanting for the spirit of the ant. Almost immediately I realized I had done it wrong and started over, this time performing it flawlessly. This allowed me to give the ability to Yasui as well. I chanted for two minutes, which would allow us twenty minutes of

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the ability, more than enough time, and then stopped. Katrina used *pyrokinesis*, something I hadn't learned, to put the fire out, as agreed. I activated the *petitioning* circle, and Osman put his hand on it, hooking into it himself.

Everything was in place, Osman had the sword which he had hooked into, and began the *petitioning* ritual, which took ten minutes. This was a sort of half praying, half chanting, basically asking the universe to please open up a hole and let this certain energy come from where ever it was to where we were sort of deal. Both Yasui and I made corrections to his ritual where we believed it would help, there was a lot of repetition and I can't explain how I knew what I knew would help him, but it must have. Ten tense minutes later, there stood a guy wearing armor, finishing a lunge with a sword he must have expected to be blocked, because he went sprawling.

Yasui and I tried to keep from laughing as he looked around, and his vision settled on Albert.

"Albert, right?" he asked, sheathing the sword. "I didn't actually recognize you at first, when you were at the tree you were in your fighting form."

"Ah yes, I forgot about that. Sorry if it threw you," Albert answered back. "Hope we didn't interrupt anything too serious there."

"No, just getting in some training, actually. Not much else to do, guarding that tree all the time." He looked around the room. "Introduce me to your friends."

"Of course! Everyone, this is Haniel, one of the guards for the Tree of Life. Haniel, this is Dean, the one who asked me if I knew any angels, he's the one that wants to talk to you. And the girls are--"

Haniel got this really weird look on his face when he looked at the two girls. "Christina?" he asked, honestly puzzled. "And it's Yasui, right? What are you girls doing back at school? Didn't you graduate last year? And you look kinda... don't take this the wrong way but- young."

Yasui just looked confused, but Christina did the last thing I would have expected from her; sank to her knees and started crying her eyes out.

"Was it something I said?" asked Haniel quietly.

It took a few minutes to get Christina calmed down enough to get her story out of her. The whole time Osman was impatiently looking at his watch. I leaned over and whispered to him, "Is it draining your energy to keep him here?"

“Yes,” he answered. “The sword helps a little, but I can probably only maintain it a little more than ten minutes until I have to let him go back.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. “I can stuff some energy into you with *energy transfer* if it comes to that. Just let me know when you’re feeling like you can’t hold him here anymore.”

“Oh, great!”

“So what did I say?” asked Haniel, concerned. “I didn’t mean to upset you, it’s just I was sure you would graduate last year, I mean you’re an awesome *spirit energist* and everything.”

“You know me? I mean you really know me?” Christina asked, blinking away tears.

“Not well, I mean, you came to help defend the tree last year, because you were the best *spirit energist* in the school. But now here you are again, so what’s going on?”

“I’m not crazy.” She turned to us. “Do you hear that? I’m not losing it, something did happen to me. Finally I can tell someone, oh thank you.” She grabbed Haniel up in a big hug, almost knocking him over. Albert shook his head. “Should she really be hugging an angel?” he asked quietly.

“Tell us what?” Haniel asked, trying to loosen her hold a little.

“Sorry about that.” She stepped away. “The thing is, on my way to Demogate this year everything *changed*. I don’t know how better to explain it. I was on the plane before the plane that was going to take me to the island and suddenly there were all these different people there. I thought I was going nuts, but everything went smoothly after that- the plane came, I got to the island, I started school. I’ve been trying not to think about it but something went wrong on my way here. I couldn’t tell anyone, don’t you see? I talked to my parents, they said everything was fine, so I thought- You understand, right? They would have said I was imagining it, or that I was going crazy or something. You believe me, right?”

“I have to, here you are,” answered Haniel. “Don’t worry, we can figure this out. But Yasui, I recognize those boots, you were there too, but you were only a third year, so technically this year you should be graduating.”

“Nothing like that happened to me,” she replied, concerned. “Not that I remember, anyway.”

“All right,” said Haniel, “so you guys have something to look into, and I’ll see what I can find out from my position in the Heavenly Realms. I’ll have to ask someone to replace me at the Tree, wonder what my boss

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will say about *that* request? Wonder if I'll have to hand my sword over to my replacement?" We looked at it, confused. "Oh, it's not a normal blade, as I don't have a normal task. I can tell you about it later, we got side tracked once already. This isn't what you called me here for, is it?"

"No, actually I asked Albert here to introduce us, so I could show you this and ask you some questions." I pulled the egg out of my pouch and handed it to him, and he took it seriously.

"What is it?"

"It's an egg my parents made to house my soul, for some reason, when I was just a baby."

"*Soul transfer*," he said dubiously, "they must really have been desperate. Especially to do that to a baby."

I knew Osman couldn't hold out forever so I gave him the three minute summary of my life to put things in perspective.

"Wow," he said, impressed. "That's some story. And you're a descendant of Cain? What was that kid's name- Toby! I saw a descendant of Cain at the Tree as well, basically anyone they could get with a lot of power came that day. He was an *inheritor*, though, not an *artificer*. Weird, Cain must have been busy lately or something, to have so many of his descendants running around at once. Poor Cain, the All-Father's wrath can be terrible. Now you're saying this *unholy chosen* guy attacked you, killed you, but dropped a hint he knew your parents?"

"Exactly. And as all the *seers* in the school can't see them here..." I trailed off.

"You think they're in the Demon World. They could be behind a barrier though, in this world."

"I know, but it would take a pretty amazing *artificer* to keep out every teacher that's a *seer* or an *ESPer*, right?"

"You're right. Yes, I see why you've come to me, I think. You're worried about what could happen to your soul?"

"I'm more worried about what *has* happened to it. The *transfer* is illegal, is it that way because my soul is... damned because this was done?" He handed the egg back.

"Good news is, no!" He said brightly. "As it was done to you as a baby, you didn't consent to the ritual and your free will was not taken into account. Intent, in this case, is key. If a holy man did it to remain on Earth and further perform good works, it being illegal would be the Foundation's call. They don't want thousands of immortal people running around, raising suspicions, right? But Heaven wouldn't care, because he was doing good.

If someone was in balance, and did the ritual to avoid being judged, or to become better able to do evil, they would tip towards the negative. You see where I'm coming from, here?"

"Yes, thank you. That's a real relief. So if one day I decide to have a demon reverse the ritual, putting my soul back to become mortal again, as long as I hadn't used my immortality for evil, I should be okay?"

He nodded. "That's about right."

"Can you tell me anything else? Stuff to watch out for?"

He took a deep breath. "I'm no expert, but let me see." He thought a moment. "Firstly, if something destroys that egg, your soul is gone for good, so keep it safe. If your body is destroyed your soul can be transferred to another body, but that's not recommended, generally. First of all if there's a soul already there it's shoved out, so you're basically killing someone. Second, someone else has to do it, and they could put you in a ninety year old, and there would be nothing you could do about that. Now if the person you trusted to reanimate you managed to get a dead body, heal it with alchemy or something so it could sustain life and then put your soul in there, it would be fine."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "That's a huge weight off my chest, and some good information, thanks a lot."

"Sure thing. Glad I could reassure you. Was there anything else?"

I shook my head. "No, apart from the whole mystery surrounding the girls, anyway."

"I will check that out, no problem. I'm not sure how I'll get you word if I do learn anything, but I'll figure out something."

"We'll see what we can learn here, too. Thanks again."

Osman sent him back, looking a bit tired, but honestly glad that had worked out.

"I guess it's my turn," said Mr Verochka. "I can summon you up a Simurgh, but you'll have to have knowledge to trade with him, he won't tell you stuff for free. He won't even tell *me* stuff for free, and we've known each other for years."

"Do you think all this oddness will be good enough?"

"I have no idea, but we can find out easily enough!"

He turned around and brought out three feathers, each a different color, and asked if I could set them on fire for him. I did, and he spoke some words for the *summoning*. There was a tremendous tearing in front of us as reality spilt open to reveal a huge bird looking thing with the head of a dog, easily seven meters tall. He glared down at us.

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“Who summons me?” he boomed.

“Oh drop the act, it’s me, Stephen.”

“What?” He crouched down lower, taking in Stephen with one eye. “Oh, it is you,” he concluded.

“That was pretty amazing, don’t you-” I started to say to Osman, but when I looked he was sitting on the floor, gazing at the simurgh in wonder. “Uh, Osman, you okay?”

“He summoned that huge thing, just like that,” he managed.

“Don’t worry about it kid, you’ll get there,” said the simurgh. “Now, what can I do for you all?”

Mr Verochka nudged me forward. “I’m hoping to find some information about my parents, I’ve recently learned they may be hanging around the Demon World for some reason.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad. Name?”

“Dean Chesterfield.”

“Ah yes, Mr and Mrs Chesterfield. Quite famous in the right circles, I can tell you about that. What have you got to trade?”

“If I tell you some things, and if it’s worth more than the information about my parents, can I ask some other stuff, maybe later?”

“Good question. You’re no dummy, kid, I like that. I can agree to those terms, but I warn you, there’s not a lot I don’t know.”

“There’s a new type of power people are practicing now, we’re calling it *dreamers*.”

“What? There hasn’t been any new power types in thousands of years. You’re pulling my leg.”

“It’s true. There’s at least 6 people in the world that can go to sleep, start dreaming, and then step from that dream into reality. Then they can manipulate reality as though they were dreaming.”

“You’re telling the truth,” he said, astonished. “How was this power found out?”

“Not long after the school was founded, every so often a bus would disappear into some weird dream space and everyone would forget it. That dream space was protecting an evil *talisman*, which we destroyed. Doing that brought everyone out of that space and back into reality. The teachers started investigating why those busses were taken, and strange stuff started happening in the dorms. Basically, a creature was created from negative dream energy and took form, attacking people. We, well, Christina killed it, we all just helped. When researching the creature to find out what it was, it we ran across an old article about some guy doing research on his daughter’s “under

the bed monsters,” and emailed her. She’s like in her twenties now, she was I think three then. She explained it all to us, and found that on every bus there was a *dreamer*. So now she’s training people.”

“Astonishing,” said the simurgh. “How complete is this control of reality?”

I shrugged. “I heard she showed off some pretty impressive stuff, but I didn’t see it. As I understand it, she could create a car out of nothing because it’s a real object, and it would stay around forever. But a faster than light spaceship she would have to concentrate on because it doesn’t exist. Yet.”

“I will have to look into this, that could be a very useful power to make use of. Okay, I think-”

“There’s more.”

“Oh?” He seemed very interested. “Do tell.”

“I tell you this because maybe, with your knowledge and connections, you can make some sense out of it. We just got done *petitioning* an angel who remembers Christina and Yasui from last year as upperclassman. But here they are as freshman, and Christina remembers reality actually changing around her as she flew here. He also said there was a kid named Toby who was a descendant of Cain like me, but I’ve never heard of the guy, and no one else has mentioned him in my classes, so where did he go? You would think someone who knew him would compare the two of us, right?”

The simurgh peered intently at Christina. “You fell through time?”

“Not exactly,” she answered after a moment. “If I fell through a crack in time, the plane wouldn’t have been there anymore, so I would have fallen out of the sky at that point. And as far as I know the date was the same when I left home as when I arrived here. It’s just “here” is apparently four years in what I would have called my future.”

He pondered for a moment. “All I can say now is I’ll ask around, see if anyone else I know has heard a similar story. Sorry I can’t help more with that, it must be pretty weird for you. What about the other girl?”

“I didn’t notice anything, but Haniel says he saw me at some tree, so...”

“I see. Any other bizarre happenings you want to throw at me?”

“An *unholy chosen* infiltrated the school and killed me. I got better.”

“Well, that makes total sense. Okay, I can tell you about your parents, like I said, I know about them, but I don’t know them myself. See, after they had this kid, I guess that’s you, the story goes the baby got sick.

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Being an *artificer*, the woman, I mean your mother, tried all kinds of things to cure you. But nothing worked, so they took you to the Foundation so *alchemists* and *holy chosen* and who knows what all powers could be tried on you. Didn't help.

"So the story is, she had a Summoner call up a devil to make a deal to save you. Naturally the devil was more than happy to oblige, and for a price, put your soul into an object so you wouldn't die of the disease. Girl was smart enough to not give up her soul, instead she said that she and her husband would work for the devil in the Demon World, until such time as her son came to claim them.

"He agreed, but said the son would have to perform a task for him, something that would give him equal value to her soul, which is pretty pricey, let me tell you. So they busted the kid up, I mean you, and went to fulfill their contract. End of story."

"So they are still alive," I said, stunned.

"Yup, far as I know. Don't worry, the devil that made the deal wouldn't want to, couldn't really, renege, so he would need to keep them healthy if not happy until you show up to do your service."

"So why does an *unholy chosen* killing him make sense?" asked Yasui.

"That's easy. Get the ball rolling, so to speak. He doesn't die, he looks into it, he finds out about his parents, he wants to rescue them, he goes charging in, get it?"

"But he got killed."

"Maybe he underestimated you. You're all first year students, right? I mean apart from the bouncing around time thing."

We all nodded.

"Okay," he said. "Unless you want some specific info on him, which I doubt as he's dead, I still owe you some info. I can get you the devil's name and where he is in the Demon World."

"That would be much appreciated!"

So the simurgh gave me the information and he too disappeared from this dimension, going back to wherever he came from. Yasui turned to me.

"Your parents are alive! Isn't that great news?"

"It is," I said, nodding. "So pack a bag, we're going to the Demon World."

**Letter of the Law**

*“You can’t get something for nothing you know.” -- Ursula*

Of course I said that, but the reality was a little different. As much as I wanted to just rush off and save my parents, Osman rightly said we should take this all to a teacher, so we did. The next day we all piled into Mr DeLefeu’s office and told the story of what we found out.

“I have to say I’m impressed,” Mr DeLefeu said. “We didn’t get nearly that far in our efforts. Of course most of what happened probably took place in the Demon World, where our *seers* can’t directly get information from. Mr Stilling and Mr Vorachka both *summoned* some demons they’ve worked with over the years, but we didn’t get any information, probably because we were asking the wrong questions. You guys asked about the past, we asked about the present- if there’s a contract in force relating to this issue they wouldn’t be able to speak about it anyway.

“Of course it’s also possible you were able to get the information because it relates to you. After all, how can you fulfill the contract if you don’t know about it?” He sighed. “Your parents really put me in an *awkward* position, you know that? Obviously I don’t want to leave two humans at the mercy of any devils for a second longer than is required, but they did bring this on themselves.”

“To save me,” I protested.

“I know. I think there’s something else going on here- this disease the devil was able to work around, where did it come from?”

“And where did it go?” I asked. “I’m not still sick, am I? I don’t feel sick, but then if I had it as a baby, I wouldn’t know any difference.”

“I’ll have the records sent over, as you said they did go to the Foundation for help. There should be records of what it was and what was tried.”

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“But that doesn’t solve our immediate problem.”

“No it doesn’t. We need to see Dean safely through this ‘service’ you spoke of and get his parents back.”

“Why bother?” asked Yasui, punching a fist into her other hand. “Just send some *spirit hunters* with us and rescue his parents by force!”

“It’s not that easy, I wish it was,” he replied, shaking his head. “*Spirit hunters* would be more than happy to go slaughter a bunch of demons for you, but there’s the contract to consider.”

“How so?”

“It’s a demon contract, so you can bet it was created with magic. If the devil was smart, and they are, it was worded in such a way that only your service can break it. That means even if we go in there and slaughter every demon we find, if that contract says your parents can only leave after your service, then that’s the only time they can leave. The spell that enforces the contract will make sure of that.”

“It can bend reality?” asked Christina, thoughtfully.

“I know what you’re thinking, maybe a contract is what changed your lives? I don’t know. I certainly don’t remember you being at the school before, and Haniel says he does, but that doesn’t mean anything. It’s possible, but... just a second.” He picked up the phone in his office and dialed a number, but as he put the receiver to his ear there was a knock on the door.

It opened a crack. “You wanted to see me?” asked Mrs Nolan, who was a *seer*, poking her head through.

Mr DeLefeu set the phone down. “You know I hate it when you do that! Do you know why you’re here?”

“I do. If you’ll permit me, Christina? I just want to look into your eyes for a moment to make sure you’re not under any sort of demonic influence.”

“Fine, sure, go ahead.”

Mrs Nolan gazed at her for a moment, then repeated the procedure with Yasui, and pronounced both of them clean.

“Thank you,” said Mr DeLefeu as she left again. “That’s a relief. If your lives were changed by contract it was done indirectly, rather than you signing something and then being made to forget about it.”

“So now what?” asked Christina.

“You’ve spoken to your parents, right?”

“Yeah, they think- oh, right, yes, they think everything is normal, there are not two of me running around.”

“Just checking. I don’t know, unless we can find someone else who went through a similar experience, we don’t have many leads. And any changes like Yasui went through, if she did at all, she never consciously picked up on. Just asking around isn’t likely to help. I don’t know. There doesn’t seem to be any danger to either of you, for the moment I would just suggest going about your business until we take care of Dean’s issue.”

“Anyone we talked to would probably be pretty reluctant to talk about it anyway,” said Christina. “I know I was, because I thought I had gone nuts. Maybe we can put up a flyer or something.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Yasui.

“Whatever you think is best. Now, obviously I’m not going to allow you to go to the Demon World by yourself, Dean. You are totally unprepared to deal with even a small part of it alone. The more people I send, the better you’ll be able to deal, but the greater the danger because there’s more of you. I hate to send a teacher, most are as ignorant as I am about the Demon World, Albert here’s been there more than any teacher here anyway. You can read about it all day, but until you’ve actually been there, well, it’s a different experience.”

“I’m happy to escort them, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I was, so thank you. But you do still need an adult, and as this relates to you, Dean, would you mind if your foster father went with you?”

“Why no, that would be fine,” I said. *Maybe now I’ll get to see what kind of powers he has!*

“Okay. I’ll give him a call, explain the situation, and see when he’s free. We’ll set the date tentatively for the first Saturday of March, that will give you almost two weeks to prepare and the entire weekend to do the job. Hopefully that will interfere with your classes the least.” He held up a hand. “I know, you’d like to have your parents back right away, but honestly I really think you need time to prepare for something like this. Better to do it right than not at all. I’ll recommend some texts on the Demon World you can look over until you leave, and Albert can give you some ideas about what you’ll face. Albert, I recommend you call your old friends and get their input on your journey as well. The Demon World seemed to be their second home, the amount of time they spent there. Both with and without asking permission, I might add. Also we’ll need to *summon* some devils, see if we can get information about the place where your parents are being held out of them. You’ll probably have to be there for that, as they’ll probably only tell you. Otherwise, prepare yourselves- we have no idea what this service is, so it could be very dangerous.”

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“We’re going,” said Yasui strongly. “Right, Christina?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“You don’t have to, I don’t want you getting hurt,” I protested.

“Wait a minute, us getting hurt? Who took out that *unholy chosen*?”

“You did,” I reluctantly agreed.

“That’s right. And killed that dream creature? My girl the *spirit energist*.” Yasui grabbed her opposite shoulder and squeezed her. “How about you Osman?”

“I won’t be able to *petition* in the Demon World, but my eyes are yours if you want them. And Kat says her powers are at your disposal, as well.”

“Thanks, all of you. Like Mr DeLefeu said, we don’t know what this service is, if we need to come back to the real world your powers will work. We may need Haniel on short notice, if he’s still willing to help us. Practice getting him here in a hurry I guess.”

Osman nodded.

“Okay, if you’re all set on going I won’t stop you, but like I said, where you’re going is like being a scuba diver- a completely inhospitable environment for you. Don’t take this trip lightly, learn all you can before you go.”

We all nodded. “We will.”

Not soon enough for my tastes, it was finally time to leave. I had learned what I could about the Demon World, and made myself another *talisman*, basically an undershirt with a force field built into it. I had to activate it with energy, like my *Phase talisman*, as I didn’t have the time to make it permanent. It didn’t take too much so I was happy. *Better to make myself a little tired than a lot dead*, I thought.

I had put some bottles of *Aqua Vitae* Albert had given me, along with medical supplies and the like into my pouch. Mr DeLefeu had given me some *wards* and a *talisman* too. Three healing, two ignore, two stasis, two immobilize, and two truth, plus a *talisman* to get us back home again once we were there, which he said he wanted back. Of course I had my own stock of acceleration *wards*. Albert also had me carry a jar full of sparkly dust he called *Pixie Powder* and some corked vials of *Incendiary Ether* he warned me to be careful about. He was quite interested in my pouch though, as he watched me feed everything into it. He had both swords with him in one sheath, which looked like something he had made himself to carry them both more easily. He actually gave me quite a fright when he

walked up, he looked like a humanoid dragon, standing easily three meters tall, with wings, a tail and his *bloodiron* breastplate and helmet. I guess that was the “fighting form” the angel had spoken of. I was impressed, to say the least. Even demons would think twice about fighting a beast that looked like that. I asked him if he could use those swords like he looked like he could use them, and he said he got by.

During that week and a half we had been contacted by the Foundation about the condition I had as a child, and all they could tell me was that it was supernatural in nature. All the normal means of dealing with things like that didn’t work. They apologized for not knowing more, but it was 13 years or so ago, so I didn’t expect too much.

Donald had closed the shop for a few days and an *ESPer* had teleported him to the school, where I had fun showing him around. We knew right were to go, thanks to the *simurgh*, so we were going to Iceland and then to the Demon World from there. Mrs Darrington activated the *teleport ward* we used to get there, as she had been close to where we needed to go. Once there, Mr Verochka, who had come with us for this, wished us luck and opened a portal to the Demon World.

We stepped through.

I had read that every place in the real world corresponded exactly to the Demon World. It wasn’t exactly the same, like waterfalls sometimes ran uphill, and the land did not curve down, but rather up, like living on the inside of a ball rather than the outside.

We all looked around, getting our bearings. The place was desolate, and a river of red ran off in the distance, where before there was a normal river in the real world. Instead of trees, twisted mockeries of stone had pushed their way through the nearly black clay at our feet. The sky was a dark red, and black birds flew *backwards* overhead. The air was heavy and hot, and stank of sulfur, exactly what you would expect the home of a devil to smell like. Off in the distance was a building, which my foster father pointed out.

“Let’s go, and stick together, this ground doesn’t seem too stable,” I said, pressing down with my foot and squishing the clay, making a weird noise.

“I’m going to change,” said my foster father, “please don’t be alarmed. I just think I’d feel better having my fur on now than needing to get it on later.”

We all stepped away from him and watched as his form rippled and grew, finally settling on a werewolf looking form.

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“Cool,” I said.

“But like I said, not very useful, normally. Uh, the smell is even worse now. Let’s go.”

I activated my “armor” and hooked into my energy *talisman*, also making sure my *regeneration* was active- Mr DeLefeu and others told us not to let our guards down for a second here. The six of us slowly started heading towards the structure, which seemed to be a castle. Two devils stood at the entranceway which could be reached across a long stone bridge over a moat of sorts. A ring had been dug around the castle and down inside of it, a fire raged, seemingly out of control, and without anything to burn. There was no handrail.

“Careful now,” growled Donald. We went single file across the bridge and stopped before the devils who were looking us over.

“Well, well,” said the one on the left. “Someone’s brought us some sacrifices. You didn’t need to come all the way here, you could have sent them in the traditional way.”

“No one wants to follow the old traditions anymore, you know,” said the one on the right.

“It’s a real pity, that is. Still, this way we get to have some fun before the main event, isn’t that right, sweet cheeks?” He was looking at Christina as he said this, who raised her arm, and shot an arrow almost too fast for me to follow. She put it right beside his head, and he looked over at it without moving his head.

“Why don’t you come over here and try it?” she asked.

“We’re just joking around, lady. You know what a joke is? Come on!”

“I’m Dean Chesterfield,” I announced, “And I’m here for my parents.”

“Hey Bezeroff, the kid’s here for his parents,” said the right one.

“That’s what I heard him say Zazzerax,” said Bezeroff. “Looks like the little tyke is growing up fast!”

“Yeah, I remember when he was just this big,” said Zazzerax, pretending to cradle a baby.

“He was so cute, I could have just eaten him alive.”

“I would have ripped his soul out, then eaten him alive.”

“Oh yeah? Well I would have tortured him for hours, then ripped his soul out, then eaten him alive.”

“Really? Not before I tortured his parents in front of him, burned him beyond recognition while they watched, ripped his-”

“SHUT UP,” a loud voice ran out from inside the castle, “and let them in before I do all that stuff to you two, you morons!”

The two bowed low, sweeping their arms towards the opening to let us pass.

“Let me kick one of them into the flames,” whispered Yasui.

“They’re immune to fire,” I whispered back.

“Aww.”

We carefully made our way past them, but they didn’t move a muscle. We found ourselves in the entranceway of the castle, where another devil, who looked basically identical to the ones we had just seen, stood looking annoyed.

“Honestly,” he said, “it is so hard to find good help these days. In some areas, anyway. Take my akaname there,” he pointed to a small frog looking thing that was currently licking the walls. “Works day and night cleaning the place up. Loves it, can’t get enough. Those two idiots, I don’t know why I just don’t- anyway, that’s not why you’re here. Let’s all have a seat and talk about some things.”

“I want to know my parents are alright.”

“Ah you must be Dean, you’ve grown all right, as you humans tend to do. Don’t worry, they’re safe, ‘a happy human slave is a productive human slave’ am I right? Or is it ‘a happy human slave needs more torture.’ I can never remember. Please, sit, we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

I looked over at Donald, who nodded, and the devil guided us into a separate room where a fire was going in the fireplace and some large couches were arrayed around it.

“Seriously? Fire?” asked Christina, looking at it.

“It does get pretty chilly in this castle sometimes,” the devil said without missing a beat. “I do want to be a good host, after all.”

“I bet.”

He sat down closest to the fire and we sat opposite him, with a table in between us.

“Come now my dear, you seem angry with me, when in fact I’ve done Dean here a great service! By putting his soul into an object, he has been able to live a short but full life, and now stands before me healthy and whole. What is thirteen years of slave labor from his parents compared to that, hum? Or is it fourteen? I forget. Anyway, you’ve come to claim them from me as specified in the contract? I have it right here if you’d like to read it over.”

## DUE PROCESS

“You did it, didn’t you?” asked Osman.

“Ah, the *petitioner* speaks, I wondered if it was able. I wrote up the contract, yes, which I think was quite fair though I knew I would be ridiculed by my fellow-”

“That’s not what I mean,” interrupted Osman. “I mean you gave Dean the disease that almost took his life, just so you could swoop in and ‘save’ him. Thus getting your hands on a talented *artificer* and a guy that can learn to do anything with enough time, like Dean here can.”

The devil seemed taken aback for a moment, then slowly clapped a few times. “Bravo, how did you figure it out?”

“I just thought of the worst thing you could have done, then tried to somehow make it worse than that.”

“Such a pity you’re on the other team,” he sighed. “After all I did just lose my *unholy chosen*, the moron. You seem to have the right kind of ideas. Honestly, what I said about good help before? He was supposed to get in, give you the push, kill you, and get out. But no, he had to play around, didn’t he, and get killed. I put a lot of effort into him you know? I’m not mad at you, of course, you did what you had to I’m sure, and a less than stellar mind no longer taints my organization. I accept that. Are you sure I couldn’t get you to sign up with me, take his place?”

“I would rather die,” Osman answered fiercely.

“Pity. In any case, yes, he’s unveiled my little plan. Once I learned of your parents they were such a tempting target, Dean, how could I resist? And with you being so small and vulnerable, well, it was perfect, don’t you think? And while they’ve not been overjoyed to work here, I’ve been giving them information on you as you’ve grown up so they’ve done all I asked. That’s why I had my agent go get you, you see, they’ve done what I wanted them to do and I really don’t want to feed them anymore. I’ll be happy to have you take them off my hands.”

“If you’re done with them, why not just let them go?”

He laughed. “Oh I would, just to get away from their *constant* whining about things, but they have value to you. If it got out I gave something of value away *free*, well, my reputation would never recover.”

“That doesn’t seem like my problem. Where are they?”

“Oh, don’t worry, they’re alive and well. Don’t get any bright ideas about just killing me, either. They don’t walk out of here until you bring me what I want. This makes sure of that.”

He handed me the contract, and I took a quick read through it, which was basically what I expected. For the life of their son (me) he would accept

a lifetime of service from them, or something equally valuable, brought by me. I handed it over to Donald, who still looked like a werewolf, and he read it over too.

“My good wolf,” the devil said, “you seem to have a bit of the demon about you already. Can I offer you employment perhaps? I’m thinking of a new guard for my castle, the banter of those two you met out front is starting to wear a little thin, and- no?”

My foster father was shaking his head.

“What about you?” he asked Albert. “I don’t sense any demonic presence in you, but that form; it’s magnificent! I would offer you a lot to personally kill those two outside and take their place.”

Albert just glared at him, hands twitching a little towards his blades.

“You see, what did I tell you? All the good help is already taken, it’s criminal. You think there’s no justice up there? How do you think it works down here?”

“My heart bleeds, what do you want me to get you?”

“Oh if only it did, Dean, if only it did. That would be a glorious sight, especially if your parents were there to watch. Anyway, to business! What I want you to get me is rather small, actually. It’s an object that’s been lost for many years, but I think I’ve finally found the information I need to track it down. The dragon is long dead, so I’m sure there’ll be no trouble at all picking it up. I’d go myself, but, evil to be about and all that, you know? I’m just so darn busy. But it’s worth a lot and I think with your so called friends working together you shouldn’t have much trouble getting it.”

“You want something from a dragon’s hoard?”

“Oh, not just *something*, I want the one and only Ruby Rose.”

**The Heist**

*But once we're in the vault, how do we get out with the money?*

“Minion!” shouted the devil, and we all jumped in our seats. An imp flew into the room and landed on the table, bowing to the devil.

“You bellowed, boss?” it said.

“Go and get me the Ruby Rose picture and the map piece.”

“Right away boss,” he replied, and took off again.

“Now, the thing I want you to get is part of a dragon hoard, but where it originally came from no one knows. Some say an *alchemist* worked on it as a gift for someone for most of their life. Others say it fell from Heaven. Wherever it came from, it's said to be the most perfect object on Earth. I have a really old sketch of it but of course that can't do it justice. Anyway, it wound up in this dragon's hoard and it's been there ever since. The dragon has long since died but of course lairs are so well hidden, it may well have been lost to the world. The thing is, this dragon was a little odder than most, and actually left a map to get into his lair, like he didn't want his treasure to just sit there for all time, unappreciated. Of course he didn't make it easy, because he broke it into four pieces before he died and scattered them around.”

The imp flew back into the room and handed the devil a rolled up tube of something and a photo. The devil glanced at it. “Not the Australian model with the arm tattoos you idiot,” he shouted, flicking the imp with a finger. “The crystal Rose, the thing sitting right next to the map you just picked up?”

“Oh, sorry boss, sorry about that, going now, sorry, right away.” He started to fly away.

“Put this back!”

“Right, putting it back, how stupid of me, stupid, stupid, sorry.” He took the picture and zoomed away.

“You see what I mean? That’s why your parents were such a great asset for me, Dean. I would say ‘develop this for me’ and they would sigh, and ask for way too many resources up front, and drag their feet, but in the end, they did want I wanted. But if I sell the Rose I can afford to pay some demons to do stuff I need on a contract basis rather than ‘employing’ them full time. Ah, but you don’t care do you?”

The imp zoomed back in with the right picture and he handed it to me, and I looked and passed it over. It was basically a crystalline Rose, probably made of ruby, as you wouldn’t call something made of diamond a “Ruby Rose” you would call it a “Diamond Rose.” The devil unrolled the map and spread it out on the table.

“So here’s a quarter of the map. My agents have tracked down the other three pieces, two here in the Demon World and one in your world. Once assembled they should show the area well enough to figure out where the lair is hidden.” He gestured to some squiggles around the edge of the paper. “This is in the demon tongue, so I’ll have to provide you with a translation once all the parts are assembled. It may be some kind of warning or passphrase or something, no big deal. Now, what have I forgotten? Your supplies, of course, how else will you get there?”

He reached to his right and took a bag that was sitting on the floor and dumped it out on the table. Several pieces of paper fluttered out, and he moved them around, looking at both sides.

“Right, see the numbers on the back? These are *wards* to help you get around, they’ve been programmed with different destinations. Your mother’s work, actually, Dean. Just activate them, throw them to the ground, and a circle will appear that you can walk through. Wait, why am I telling an *artificer* how to use *wards*? The incompetence around here better not be rubbing off on me. See the number on the back? Each one takes you someplace different. Now these with a ‘1’ on them lead back here, there’s a number of them just in case. Number ‘2’ through ‘4’ lead to each piece of the map, at least as close as my agents have been able to come. Now the first one here in the Demon World seems to be in the possession of some crazy hermit that lives up in some mountains someplace. The *ward* will get you close, don’t worry. The other one here in the Demon World is owned by a naga, so one will take you to Bhogavati, the naga city. Don’t worry, humans go there all the time, you won’t be remarked on.”

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“I’ve been there,” whispered Albert.

“The one in your world, don’t ask me how it wound up there, but it seems to be in some library in Germany. You can just make a copy of it, I don’t need you to steal the original. I’m sure the *petitioner* there would object to such a heinous idea.”

“Especially since you suggested it,” Osman said.

“What did I tell you? Take as long as you like, but honestly like I said Dean, your parents made me everything I needed them too. I’m not keen on feeding them much anymore, so I’d hurry if I were you.”

I glared at him.

“That’s a good look for you. Any questions?”

“To sum up,” my foster father said, “you want us to travel to these three locations and get the map piece away from whoever has it now. Then come back here and get this translated. You’ll then send us to get the Rose, which we bring back and exchange for Dean’s mother and father. You don’t care about the rest of the treasure?”

“That’s it exactly. The Rose is worth more than the rest of the treasure combined, so you can have it for your hard work. Speaking of that, are you absolutely certain I couldn’t offer you work? You seem smarter than half my staff just being able to string together sentences that are coherent.”

“You could try being nicer to them,” said Yasui. “That might make them want to do a better job for you.”

The devil looked quizzically at her for a moment, then finally said, “Nah, it would never work.” He got out of his chair, and looked down at us. “You can stay here and plan things if you want, I don’t mind. Just don’t touch anything. Good hunting,” he said, and walked away.

I picked up the *wards* and fed them individually into my pouch so I could get them out individually, and looked to my father. “Now what?”

“It doesn’t sound as bad as it could have been,” he replied, “as we don’t really know what we’ll find ourselves in let’s just pick one and go see what we can do. I don’t know what we’ll offer the demons that have the other pieces so we’ll just have to play it by ear. This is what we came here to do, after all.”

“Anything else?” I asked everyone. “Albert, you said you’d been to Bhogavati?”

“Yeah, my friends and I went there a couple of times to get stuff, and one of them had some trouble there, but I can show you around a little. Like he said, there are all kinds of things walking around there, so don’t make trouble and they won’t.”

“Okay. Number three sound okay to you guys?”

They nodded, and I pulled the number three *ward* out of my pouch and activated it, throwing it to the ground. I stuck my head through first, just to make sure it wasn't a trick, and I saw the other end was up in the mountains someplace, so I figured it had worked and stepped through. The others followed, and we looked around.

We stood on a mountain trail, the air here was a little clearer but not much. I looked out over the landscape in search of landmarks but saw none. Yasui came up beside me and sighed.

“Makes you think about what you should do to avoid coming here when you die, huh?” she asked.

I nodded. “Where's all the trees?” asked Christina, trying to peer down the mountain. “It's all just rock.”

“There are some trees here,” answered Albert. “At least they kind of look like trees and would probably try to eat you.”

“What I'm wondering is where does air come from in this place? Obviously I'm still breathing, and most demons have to breathe too, but no plants that I can see. This place has been around forever, where's the good air come from?”

We all stood silently a moment, pondering this. “Well,” I said at last, “time to earn your keep Osman. Check the area out and see if you can find any hermits or whatever around here.”

“Yeah,” said Yasui, “this whole place gives me the creeps. That sky-” she shivered.

Osman concentrated, and pointed up the mountain. “There's an entrance up there, it's not too far, we can make it easily.”

So we tramped up the mountain pass to the entrance, and peered inside. It was pitch black so we couldn't really see anything. I pulled the sun-light dagger out of my pouch and led the way in, motioning everyone to be quiet. “Oh, it would be another tunnel,” said Christina. “Why don't you stay and guard the entrance,” I suggested in a whisper. “Your bow has caused problems in caves before, and if something comes up the mountain, you can hold it off from further away than any of us.”

“Good idea,” she said, edging back from the darkness of the cave.

We didn't have to go far before junk of all kind was illuminated by my blade; Clothes, scraps of paper, twisted metal forms, all kinds of crap lined the walls of this cave, but it seemed no one was around. We had only been silently making our way in for half a minute or so when we came to

## DUE PROCESS

the back of the cave, where a sort of workbench had been constructed. Off to one side, on a peg hung a lantern that glowed with eery blue flames. Again, no one seemed to be there.

“Weird lantern,” remarked Yasui.

“Don’t touch it,” said Donald, “just focus on finding the map piece.”

“Why leave your lantern here, rather than out front so you can grab it before you come into the cave?” she asked no one in particular.

We started poking around, and Yasui was rooting through a pile of clothes to see if there were papers underneath. There was a flurry of movement and a figure jumped up out of the pile and grabbed up the lantern!

Yasui gasped and jumped back, more surprised than anything else, but tripped and fell backwards over some junk on the floor. I ran over to her, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“There’s someone here,” she said, pointing. We all looked over and there was a decrepit old man standing there holding the lantern in front of him and looking at us.

“Humans are in my cave!” he exclaimed. “What could they possibly want?”

“Hello?” I asked, unsure what sort of demon this was. “Sorry to barge in, we didn’t think anyone was here.”

“Oh, I see. If someone isn’t home, then it’s perfectly all right to go in and start messing with their stuff, is that what you’re saying?” asked the demon, hopping towards me on one foot. “You think this is some kind of video game or something?”

“Well, normally no, but the door wasn’t locked, so—”

“Door?” said the man sharply. “I live in a cave!”

“Just ignore him,” said Yasui. “He likes to joke around. We are sorry for barging in like this, it’s just we’re looking for something and we’ve been told it was here.”

“Told by whom?”

“A devil that’s holding Dean’s parents hostage. We need to get him something so he’ll let them go.”

The little man looked around. “And you came here?” he said in a shocked voice. “What could you possibly want from my little junk heap of a living space?”

“Part of a map,” I answered. “I don’t know what I can offer you in exchange, but if we can find it I’m sure we could come to some arrangement.”

“Maybe,” said the man, “maybe. Is this all of you there are?”

“No, there’s one more guarding the door, she doesn’t like... enclosed places.”

He went “hummmmmmm” and took a look at us all. “Well, you have something I want, that’s for sure,” he said to me, “but your buddy there has even more” he said, pointing to Albert. He then went on to study Yasui and Osman. “You have about half as much, hardly worth my time,” he said Yasui. He snorted when he looked at Osman and Donald. “You hardly have any, half what the girl has, angel boy, how do you get out of bed in the morning? And the wolf’s not so hot either. Let’s see your other friend and we’ll talk about making a deal.”

He started hopping his way out the cave, so I leaned over to ask Albert, “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“That’s a jiangshi,” he answered quietly. “He wants your spirit energy, which he keeps in that lantern of his. I recognize his kind now, sorry I didn’t before, I’ve only seen one once, a couple of years ago, the lantern should have been a dead giveaway. Should have brushed up on my demonology.”

“Don’t sweat it, at least he’s not attacking us.”

“There’s way more of us, he’s not dumb. If he does try something, don’t bother hitting him, go for the lantern, that’s where his life is.”

“Got it.”

“You coming or what?” the jiangshi yelled back at us. “I don’t want to get bashed in the head by your friend if I go out first you know.”

“Sorry!” We exited the cave and the old man’s eyes lit up as he looked at Christina, who looked at him with disgust. “What is this creature?” she asked.

“The name’s Borsnach, little missy, and you can give me a lot, can’t you?”

“I’m not giving you anything.”

He barked a laugh. “You are if you want this piece of map your friends are talking about. Okay, here’s my price: five hundred energy. No more, no less. As you can see I like to live alone, but every so often I have to go and get energy to stay alive. But you guys give me a whole bunch and I’ll be set for a while, got it? So that’s the deal: five hundred energy and you can take one thing, and one thing only, out of my cave. How’s that sound?” We all looked at each other in confusion. “What, am I speaking Greek here, what’s the deal?”

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“We don’t know how much that is,” I said. “And we’ll need to take ourselves out of the cave. The deal is for taking one thing we didn’t bring into the cave out of the cave.”

“Oh, one of those literalists, huh? Fine, I’ll agree to those terms.”

“I just don’t want to get in trouble with wording, you demons can be pretty tricky like that. No offense.”

“Offense? You just complemented me! Now about that five hundred...”

“You can’t just assign a number to how much energy you carry around with you,” protested Christina.

“Of course you can!” insisted the man. “Right now I would say these two strapping boys have more than a hundred apiece,” he said, pointing to Albert and me. “The girl with the boots has about half that, the wolf and the angel guy have half that. You my dear have between them and boots girl, but I know for a fact you can get more pretty easily. Do it, and I can take more than half from you I’m thinking. Then I’ll finish up with everyone else until I have my five hundred. Deal?”

“Will it hurt?” asked Yasui.

“Does picking up something heavy *hurt*?” asked the man. “Of course not. It’ll just flow into my lantern, nice and easy. Come on, I won’t take it all, I’ll spread it out over all of you, and a good night’s sleep later you’ll be good as new. Come on, what do you say?”

I motioned Christina over and said “Give us a minute,” to the demon.

“Take your time, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Well, Christina, can you do your *Spirit Grade* thing again and give this guy the energy he wants?”

“I guess,” she answered, “but that’ll leave us vulnerable, my arrows are made of that energy so if we get attacked, I won’t be able to do much if he drains me that far.”

“We shouldn’t get attacked,” I said, “should we? I mean, one’s in a library, and the other is in a demon city, we should be able to make some kind of trade for it, right? Will we have to fight anyone for it? Albert, you know better than us.”

“If a naga has it, they would probably deal, just don’t make any deal that’s too opened ended, that’s how that girl I knew got into trouble with one,” he answered. “They’re greedy, and good fighters, but they would rather avoid fighting if they can make a profit.”

“See, there you go,” I said. “So will you do it? He’s not asking for blood, it could be worse.”

“Fine, I’ll do it, but I hope you know what you’re doing.”

We broke apart and told the demon we had a deal, and he nodded. “Get your game face on, girly, can’t wait to see how much you have for me!”

Christina just looked disgusted but started concentrating, and power began to swirl around her, finally erupting from her body as she completed... whatever it was that let her do this. The jiangshi was hopping in place with delight, giggling and reaching forward, then pulling his hand back. When the power around her stabilized he hopped forward, reaching out to touch her. She pulled back.

“Now don’t you fight me on this girly,” he said, “it’ll be quicker if I can touch you, and you want this over with, right?”

She nodded, and held out her arm, which the demon grabbed. He concentrated and his lantern light started to glow brighter, and the power whipping around Christina lessened until it was gone. He let go of her and she swooned, but held up a hand as I ran towards her to steady her.

“I’m fine, that was a weird experience. He didn’t take all my energy, so he’s keeping to the agreement.”

“What do you take me for?” asked the demon, brightly. “This is the best I’ve felt in a long time, I’m glad you guys showed up. Your turn, boyo!”

The demon drained us all in turn, and was finally satisfied, his lantern glowing much, much brighter now than it had when we arrived. “It’ll be two months before this will run out,” he said, looking longingly into the flames. “So find what you’re looking for and get out of here.” We left Christina at the cave entrance again and poked around until we found the second piece of the map. The jiangshi was happily humming and doing something to his garbage, so we just left him in peace and tiredly exited the cave.

“That was weird,” remarked Donald. “But an interesting experience on the whole. I just hope the next one is that easy.”

“Easier for some,” muttered Christina, as we stepped into the light of the next *ward*.

**The Heist- Part 2**

*Look, if the money is just sitting there  
it would be criminal not to pick it up.*

We found ourselves in the courtyard of a gleaming city, demons of all kinds going about their business as though humans popping up was nothing out of the ordinary. When I say “gleaming” I meant “with gold” as it seemed most surfaces were covered with the stuff, making my eyes bulge a little bit. While we were gawking a naga got up off a bench nearby and slithered up to us. He was red in color, the upper half of him almost human, while instead of legs he had the tail of a snake. His snake part was very long, so he was almost as tall as Albert’s fighting form as he moved. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, but he had on a golden belt, multiple bracelets and necklaces.

“Greeting humans, and welcome to Bhogavati. As you are no doubt aware you have been *teleported* to the city center rather than your intended destination. This is for your comfort and convenience, and so our fantastic city has one point of entry rather than thousands. How may I-” He looked up at Albert. “Excuse me, have we met?”

“I have been here before,” answered Albert, “But I’ve met very few naga.”

“Ah that would explain it. As an official city greeter I’ve probably just seen you coming into our wondrous city before. After all, who could forget that face?” He looked over the rest of us, chuckling. “Christina!” he exclaimed. “It is a pleasure as always to see you again!”

We all hastily looked over at her, confused.

“You recognize me?” she asked.

“Should I not?” Puzzled, he slithered a bit over to her. “You do look

a bit younger than when I last saw you, but I'd recognize the best *spirit energist* in five realms anywhere. You'll want to see Narithon I take it?"

I saw the thoughts run through Christina's mind as she tried to figure out what best to say. She brightened. "Yes, actually my friends and I *would* like to see Narithon, but I always get lost around here, can you point out the way?"

"Our glorious city is rather large, it's true," the naga sighed. "The splendor of it can hardly be matched by any city elsewhere. I would be happy to show you the way, if you have something to offer me in return?"

"How about a handful of Acceleration *wards*?" I asked at once. After all, I could always make more given a night to work.

"I don't think I'm familiar with that particular *ward*," he answered, looking over at me.

"You activate it and stick it on someone and they get faster in combat."

"Interesting," he said slowly. "To the right people they could be quite valuable."

"My thinking exactly," I said, putting my hand in my pouch. "Twenty Acceleration Wards," I said, and felt them come into my hand. I had several bundles of the things, practicing their creation did sort of make them pile up in a hurry. So I grouped them in various numbers, and this was the largest. "Here you are," I said, handing them over. He took them and looked them over.

"I think this will be adequate. Follow me, please."

We followed the naga through the streets and he led us to a tower-like structure, gleaming gold like all the others. "Here you are," he said, "enjoy your visit."

"Thank you," Christina answered, and we watched as he slithered away.

"Wow, he was handsome," breathed Yasui.

"I know, wasn't he?" said Christina.

"His face, those arms."

"Not to mention that bod—" Christina seemed to shake herself. "What am I saying? Come on, let's go, as it seems I know someone named Narithon here somehow."

"Christina, welcome," he said cheerfully, "and to her friends as well! Looking for anything specific today?"

I took in the shop at a glance, it seemed like twenty or thirty stores all jammed together— products from every corner of the Earth sat on shelves, in buckets, in baskets, hung from the ceiling, the place was jam

## DUE PROCESS

packed. Food, clothes, electronics, books, weapons, the store went on as far as I could see, and beings of every description milled about with carts and baskets looking things over. I had to admit, I was impressed.

“Hey Narithon, how’s it going?” Christina asked the naga hesitantly.

“Oh, a little brighter now that you’re here, but fine all around. Who are your friends?”

“I’ll be happy to introduce you, but the thing they’re looking for is a little sensitive, can we use the... back room?”

“Of course, of course,” he answered. “Deirdre, can you watch the front counter for a minute?”

From the back a very elegant woman with long, black hair emerged, looking at herself in a mirror. Her face was very pale and beautiful, and she moved with a very interesting sway. She had on a long silk robe, tied at the middle, and she went over to sit on a stool with one leg sticking out. Donald’s tongue lolled out of his mouth and he started panting, but gave a little jump and looked away. I started to smell a very sweet scent and figured it was probably coming from her.

“If you’ll comb my hair later?” she answered.

“Hummm, don’t I always my sweet?”

Deirdre caught sight of us, and licked her lips. “Oh my,” she said simply. “So many?”

“Come right this way,” said Narithon, slithering in front of the counter and towards the back of the store. We all followed him, and I had to dodge around a display and wrench my eyes away from the woman, who was currently looking at us with her chin resting on the back of her hand.

“You know how she was looking at you?” asked Albert.

“Yeah,” was all I could manage.

“That’s because she wanted to eat you.”

“I wouldn’t mind- wait, what?”

He nodded. “That’s a *harionago*, don’t touch her or she’ll become enraged. Of course if you get her permission it’s a different story.”

“I see,” I said, dazed.

“You’ll get used to it being here, don’t worry. Some parts are really bad, but some, like this, it’s not too crazy.”

“I think I’d still prefer Heaven,” I said.

“You have no idea,” he answered cryptically, but said no more.

Past all the rows of merchandise, near the back of the store, the naga led us into a room with a long table. He gestured for us to sit, and slithered around to the other side.

“So, what can I do for you?” he asked.

“Dean?” said Christina.

“Right,” I said, putting my hand in my pouch. “First map piece. Second map piece.” The two pieces of parchment came into my hand and I pulled them out, spreading them on the table. They were opposite corners, upper left and lower right, and I set them out for the naga to look at. He whistled.

“So, it’s the Rose you’re after, huh? Seems someone’s making a move, they wouldn’t dare without all four pieces near at hand. How did you find your way here, anyway?”

“The devil that gave us the first piece said he had worked out where the pieces were, and sent us to bargain for them. He sent us here to Bhogavati, and that tour guide or whoever we met led us here, because you knew Christina.”

“You came to just the right place. I can help you out, for a price, of course. You do know where the fourth piece is, right?”

“We think so, we’re headed there after we have the third one.”

“Well now,” he said, beginning to pace back and forth. “A devil you say? That sneak, I bet I know who it is, too. How much are you allowed to give up to barter with?”

“He just wants the Rose, he didn’t care what happened to the rest.”

*Should I have said that?* I looked over and all the others were staring at me like I’d lost my mind.

“That is to say, it’s probably understood he wants it all, but some lesser portion-”

The naga started laughing. “No, too late for that, kid. Don’t have much experience in negotiation do you?”

I looked down, disgusted.

“Don’t worry, we can work something out. As it happens I myself have a piece of the map, and I’ll gladly part with it for a stake in the treasure you find- say one half the total value?”

“Now wait a second,” growled Donald, his teeth bared. “You only have a quarter of the map.”

“True, true,” the naga said, nodding. “But think of it this way, if you’re going through all this trouble he must have offered you something pretty special to turn over the Ruby Rose, so you guys don’t need the money, right?”

“He’s holding my parents hostage for it.”

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“Really? Sounds about right, it’s what I’d do. So really you’re getting something more precious than gold, right? Their lives.”

“But the devil said the Rose was worth more than the rest of the treasure!” said Yasui. “It’s not fair!”

“Fair?” The naga seemed thoughtful for a moment. “You humans sure say that word a lot, but it never happens. All right, I’ll cut you some slack. You can each take one thing from the treasure for yourselves. As long as you can carry it yourself. So not “one” chest of gold coins or whatever, one easily carried single object. Plus the Rose, of course. The rest you leave for me, bringing the completed map back to me when you’re done getting your parents back. How does that sound?”

“I guess it sounds like we have no choice,” I replied.

“Splendid! Just a second and I’ll be back with the piece.” He slithered out of the room again.

Yasui hit me in the arm. “Nice going, Dean. Way to totally give away our treasure.”

“Sorry, I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Obviously.”

“Nothing really has changed,” said Donald. “When we started this you didn’t know about any fabulous treasure and didn’t expect to get anything but Dean’s parents back. At the very least you can carry something away from this, right?”

“Still, having to split a dragon’s treasure even this many ways would have made us all rich. I could have handled that.”

The naga came back in, carrying a piece of paper, and set it down with the others.

“It’s really coming together, isn’t it?” he asked wistfully. “This is going to be great!”

“Yeah, you do none of the work but get all the benefit,” sneered Christina.

“You understand me so well, Christina” he replied. “It’s great to see you again. Better get going, don’t want to waste a minute, right? I’ll check in with you from time to time, see if you’re ready to make the exchange. And by exchange I mean hand over the completed map.”

“What if the Rose is the only thing in the dragon’s lair?” asked Donald.

“I’ll take that chance. Don’t worry, I know dragons, there’s more, and soon it’ll be mine.”

I rolled the three pages together and stuck them into the pouch.

“How exactly do you mean ‘check in’ with us?” I asked.

“I can talk to you when you’re in the human world, don’t worry about it. You’ll be at the school, ultimately?” I nodded. “I can get there. See you soon!”

He ushered us out of the back room into the store. “Hey, if you see anything you want from the shop, I’ll give you- okay that’s a lie I won’t give you any deals. I won’t rip you off too much, that’s all I can promise.”

“You’re all heart,” grumbled Christina.

“It’s a gift!” he exclaimed, slithering away.

“Wait!” I called after him. He turned. “Can we *teleport* away from the city from anywhere or do we have to go back where we came in?”

“You can *teleport* out from anyplace, don’t worry.”

“Thanks.”

He left us to go back to the front and I turned to the others.

“How do you think he knew you, Christina?”

She shook her head. “Obviously something happened on Earth that changed my history, or something. But maybe it didn’t affect anyone *not on Earth*.”

“That’s a pretty good theory. Hard to prove in practice, we don’t know who you might have known before the change in either world. Still, what a stroke of luck to find this one guy who had the map piece we needed!”

“I think he’s a big mover around here, did you see all the stuff in that store? So it was probably no coincidence. He might have a lot of rare stuff there, locked away.”

“You might be right. Shall we?”

“Hopefully this one will be the easiest,” said Yasui.

“It’s never easy,” said Albert. “We’re headed to the human world?” I nodded. “Then I better take one of those *ignore wards*, I don’t want to change form, unless you can put my armor in your pouch?”

“No, probably too heavy. Oddly it’s restricted by weight, not size, so I could put a car made of marshmallow into it but not a brick made of lead.”

I fished out the *Ignore ward*, put some of my dwindling spirit energy into it to make it more effective, and slapped it on him. “Where’d Albert go, he was standing right here. We have to leave.”

“You put a *ward* on him you dummy!” said Christina.

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“Oh, right. Sorry. Wow, that really works, I hope you’re still here, Albert. Are you going to change or do you want the other *ward*?” I asked Donald.

“I’ll change,” he answered, shrinking back into the form I knew so well.

“Then let’s go,” I said, activating the last *ward* for travel. I again stuck my head through and saw a fenced in area, and what looked like army soldiers walking around. I started to pull my head back through to tell my friends something didn’t look right when I felt someone grab me and pull me through. I found myself standing on an army base with two guns pointed at me, and the two soldiers were shouting gibberish at me. *Sounds vaguely German*, I thought.

I weakly raised my hands. “Guess he was right, it’s never easy.”

**Retrieval**

*Now they'll see the power of this fully operational battle fortress.*

The others, no doubt thinking I had stepped through on my own, followed after me, and we quickly found ourselves surrounded by soldiers with guns. They were all jabbering at us in a language none of us actually spoke, but it was clear they weren't exactly pleased to see us there. They gestured for us to move towards the building, which we did.

*Just stay calm, I heard Katrina say in my brain. If necessary I can get a message to Mr DeLefeu and the Foundation can come get us. There's something odd about these guys, they don't have powers, but I'm feeling something from them. What I'm getting through comprehension is they want to know how we got here, apparently they're more concerned that we were able to pop out of thin air like we did, rather than the fact we popped out of thin air. So this isn't a normal military base, so just everybody keep your eyes open.*

*And in reality, I sent to everyone, if we absolutely had to, we could get out of here one way or the other.*

The others nodded slightly, and we were led inside and checked for weapons. The guards inside looked in my pouch, but since they couldn't activate it they believed it was empty. They didn't give it back though. They found my *talismans* with metal detectors and dropped them into the bag- no extra energy for me until I got that back!

*Really should make that into a tattoo sometime, I thought. Osman and Donald didn't have anything suspicious so they were led through, but they took Yasui's boots and Christina's cross that she used to manifest her bow. That's weird. They couldn't know the cross or my bag were dangerous, but they took them anyway?*

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*Hey Kat, I sent, stay with our stuff until they put it someplace, we may need to get it back in a hurry. It would help if we knew where they put it.*

*Good thinking, I'm on it.*

After leading us into the complex and down an elevator, they threw the girls into a cell and put Osman, Donald and me into the one next to it. Then they left, but we saw they posted guards at the door at the end of the hallway.

"This is a fine mess you've gotten us into," Christina snarled from her cell.

"Like I said, we could take them, no need to panic yet."

"Can we?" she asked. "I can't make my bow without that cross, you know. Technically I can't use any of powers."

"*Seriously?* They're *all* activated by that thing? And you haven't asked me to make you a new one that's a tattoo *why?*"

"The cross is traditional. It's sort of a right of passage in our family."

"Haven't you ever heard of backups?"

"I... oh."

I sighed. *If I had known that, I might have made a bigger deal of letting them take our stuff. Too late now, thanks Christina.* "Worse comes to worst, we do still have a man on the outside. You can't see me but I'm winking."

"Be serious for once. That's not the point, Dean. We were seen by normal people coming out of thin air. That's not supposed to happen, and you know it."

"Somehow I don't think they are normal soldiers," said Osman, staring through the wall at them.

"That's kind of creepy," said Donald, looking at him. "You staring at the wall like that, I mean."

"That aside, what do you see?" I asked, familiar with him seemingly looking at nothing.

"Like Katrina said, they don't seem to have powers, but their eyes, something odd about the eyes."

"Nothing we can do about it now," I said. "We'll just have to wait and see if someone who speaks English shows up. Meanwhile, dad," *wait, what am I supposed to call him? Ex-dad? Dad 1? The guy previously known as dad?* "You can feel out ley lines, right?"

He nodded. "A little, I'm not great at it."

"Good enough. Can you find me one in here?"

He closed his eyes and concentrated. “Good thing you guys are all so drained, your energies would have made this harder if you- you’re in luck, there’s one right here.”

He pointed and I went over to it.

“Gather round, kids,” I said, walking over to where it was, “we’re going to get you all back up to speed. It’ll take a while, but looks like we’ve got nothing but time.”

I hooked into the line and started drawing power out of it with *energy transfer*. Christina could normally do the same, but as she was powerless without her cross we had to improvise. After transferring energy to Osman and Donald I reached around and was just able to touch the girl’s hands. It took a few trips back and forth, but finally we all were bursting with energy again. Also by that time, Kat had reported back that our stuff was under lock and key, but that she could lead us to it.

“So what do we do?” asked Christina.

Suddenly a note fluttered out of nowhere and into our cell, and Osman grabbed it up.

“Hey, is from Albert!” he said, reading it. “Says here they have called in someone who speaks English to try and find out what we’re doing here. Says place is heavily guarded, and to try talking our way out not fighting.”

“Yeah, a couple of kids popping out of nowhere is one thing,” said Donald. “Watching them beat up an army base full of soldiers? That’s something else entirely. Don’t worry Albert, we’ll-”

He stopped as the door opened, and a soldier walked in. He was challenged by the guards but pushed his way past them, running towards us. They tried to hold him back, but he broke free and threw something into the cell with us, then seemed to lose interest and spoke to the guards, confused. They pushed him back up the stairs and he left. Donald and Osman looked around, also confused.

“What was that all about?” asked Donald.

I started chuckling, picking up what the soldier had thrown- it was my pouch. “Guess it works after all,” I said.

“What? How?” was all Osman could manage.

“I put something special on this pouch because I was afraid of it being lost or stolen. I wasn’t sure how fast it would work so I didn’t say anything, but that was pretty fast.” I started putting my *talismans* back on. “In short, no matter what, this pouch will come back to me without fail. As long as I don’t drop it in the ocean or something, the world won’t have to reshape itself to do that.”

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“Sounds a little dangerous?” Osman said, edging away from me.

“Something disastrous would have to happen for it to get that bad, don’t worry.” I tied the pouch to my belt loop. “We have more options than we had before, and that’s not a bad thing. Come on,” I said, grabbing Osman and Donald by the hand. “Let’s further increase our options.” I pulled them with me and activated the ghost shaped *talisman* now once again strapped to my leg, and walked through the cell wall to where the girls were. They screamed.

“It’s just us,” I hissed. “Sorry, should have warned you.”

“Should have warned us!” said Osman, now examining the wall we came through. “How did you-”

“Talisman,” I replied simply. “Now that we’re together again, I like our odds better. But we should still-”

Suddenly we heard the door open and the two guards stood aside and saluted. “This might be our guy,” said Yasui.

He said something to the two guards and they ran over to the cell we were in, and said something back. Then they came over to our cell, where I was waving to them. “I see,” he said in English. Then something again to them and they went back to their posts.

“You were in that cell before, were you not?” he asked us.

I stepped through the bars towards him, and he jumped back, grabbing for his gun.

“There’s no need for that,” I said calmly. “We just didn’t want to be separated anymore, so now we aren’t.” He relaxed his hand and waved the two back to the door, straightening up again.

“I suppose you all could have walked out of here at any time?”

I nodded. “That’s correct. We felt, however, that we should apologize for startling the soldiers here and we needed someone who could understand us in order to do that.”

This seemed to confuse him. “Apologize?”

“Yes, we were led to believe this would be a simple library, and while the... person that gave us this information isn’t exactly trustworthy, his intel was good up until this point.”

“You’re not here to break in and steal things?”

“Why would we do that?”

“Well, it seems like a simple misunderstanding then, though we will need to ask you how exactly you got here. This place is supposed to be warded against things like this, so this sort of thing doesn’t happen.”

“Okay,” I said, confused myself. “So you know about powers then?”

“Sure, I’m a Demongate High graduate myself. After that the Foundation put me in charge of this place and here I am today. Everyone here is *supernaturally aware*, it’s where people who are aware get sent, to guard the stuff that’s here. So that’s why they’re a little bit jumpy, you know? It was only the fact you appeared to be kids and didn’t make any threatening moves that they put you in here rather than just shooting you on sight. That, and we wanted to see how you got here.” He took a walkie talkie out of his pocket and said some stuff into it, and the cell door opened. “Not that you couldn’t have gotten out any time,” he said sheepishly, “but as a gesture of good faith...”

Everyone thanked him as they left the cell and we all stood around a little uncomfortably in the hallway.

“Let’s get you off the base then, so these guys aren’t so twitchy,” he said.

“Just what exactly *is* here, if you can tell me?” asked Christina. “You get a couple of *invulnerable* demons through here, and seeing what you’re getting ripped apart by won’t help you soldier boys, you know.”

“Oh, don’t worry, we have a couple of *artificers* who turn the bullets into *wards*, so they can pierce *invulnerability*. And honestly, it’s just books and other records here, no weapons or anything really dangerous, so being attacked by demons probably wouldn’t happen.”

“Wait, books? So this is a library?” asked Yasui.

“In a manner of speaking, yes, but why? Were you sent here for a book?”

“No, a piece of a map, do you have anything like that?”

“Well, maybe, I’d have to look. Let me guess, you aren’t leaving without it, are you?”

I shook my head. “My parents are being held hostage for it. I have to get that map piece, it’s the final one. Can you help us?”

“I would have to get authorization to let you enter the archives-”

“I don’t care about that, I just want a copy of the map piece. Heck, I’ll even trade you for copies of the rest of the map, it’s no good to you guys.”

He looked thoughtful. “I might be able to swing that. School project maybe? Paperwork got lost, you guys were authorized to be here, that’s how you got through the *wards*. Or maybe you found the map somewhere, wanted to bring it to us, naturally we’ll have to see if it matches the rest... okay. Let’s go get your stuff back, I’ll get you something to eat and talk to

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my superiors, see what I can work out. Can you show me what the rest of the map looks like so I know what I'm talking about?"

"Sure," I answered.

"Okay, I think we can get you what you came for. If it's here at all. I'm Andrew, by the way."

So we were given visitors passes and assigned a guard to watch us, and Andrew went off to talk to his superiors. We got some lunch from the mess hall. The people off duty seemed interested in us, asking us about our lives, what it was like to go to Demongate High, that sort of thing. I felt a little bad for them, these people could see what I saw, but they would never know the joy of making a *talisman*, or calling on the spirits, or anything. I thought it a bit cruel to let them come so close to the supernatural world, but then deny them that last little bit of power so they could actually do stuff. *They could get talismans made though, anyone can activate them if they're made the right way. Why bother with guns then? I suppose they're familiar.* So in reality they could get powers, it was probably the Foundation that denied them anything more powerful than a couple of bullets that could harm *invulnerable* things.

We waited about two hours before Andrew came back, smiling. He told us as long as we left a full copy of the map, we could take our missing piece, and we all started grinning at each other when we heard that. He brought us into a room with a very large scanner and the forth piece already sitting there, so we made two copies, one for him and one for us. I put the four pieces in my pouch along with the copy of the completed map, and thanked him. By that time an *artificer* that worked there and I had talked about how we got here so their *wards* could be adjusted, and he thanked us for that.

"Hope your parents are okay," he said as we left. "I'd offer to help, but I really can't authorize any soldiers to go with you."

"It's okay, it's my problem anyway, so don't sweat it."

I threw the *ward* to get back to the devil's place and we all stepped through, finding ourselves outside the moat again, in front of the castle.

"Do we just hand this map over?" Yasui asked, looking at the castle with hard eyes.

"He gave us his word," said Albert suddenly, appearing beside us with a burning *ward* in his hand. We all jumped, but not as high as Yasui.

"I forgot all about you!" I gasped.

"I noticed," he replied. "I figured that was for the best, me looking like this and walking around that base? No thank you. Fitting through the doors was a little tricky though."

"Those *wards* really work, you were there the whole time? Maybe I should pick up a couple more..."

He nodded.

"Dang. Anyway, what were you saying?" asked Donald.

"Do we hand the map over?"

"We have no choice, he's the only one that can figure out where it is, and read the script around the edges to find out what it says. He did give his word."

"Like that means anything."

"To a supernatural creature like a demon it does, actually. Besides, we could argue that bringing the map to the Rose's location was the service if he goes back on his word. You did bring it to him after all, and the contract would be completed. No, he wants the Rose, and he'll probably make you go get it. He said he was 'too busy' doing evil or whatever, but I think he's just lazy."

"I do have a way to insure his cooperation, but it's sort of a trump card I'd rather not play until later, when we have the Rose. Just so we're sure he doesn't double cross us then. Plus it'll be a little obvious, those two guys at the gate can see us, after all. My plan needs to be done before we get back here."

"Save it, let's just go," said Christina. "We're almost done with this insane devil's little task, let's get it done."

So we all walked across the drawbridge again, and the two devils standing guard said we should go right in. We found our devil waiting for us. I handed him the map and he gleefully unrolled it onto the table in the room we were in before.

"Splendid, just splendid," he said, rubbing his hands together. "Yes, I know the area, I can send you there with a spell, no problem."

"Does the inscription tell you how to get in?" I asked.

"Yes, it says-" he stopped himself. "That is to say, it translates into your language as-" he paused again. "That can't be right, let me see the original."

I spread the pieces of the map out on the table and he looked back and forth between the two. He smiled and shook his head. "You clever fiend."

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“Care to tell us what’s going on?” asked Donald, now in his wolf form again since we crossed the bridge.

“Sure, I think you’ll appreciate it. First, it looks like some of the ink used to make this map was made *unseen*, look.” He pointed to the squiggles around the edges and some of the details of the map, and he was right, some things didn’t show up in the copy. “Second, the writings are totally gibberish. Oh, they look legit, and it seems to be some kind of spell or password, but something doesn’t add up. I’m going to try something.”

He spoke some words, and a glowing circle appeared under the map pieces, yet was totally visible. The edges closed up to become a single map again. He looked it over.

*Magic seems useful too. Wonder if I could pick that up from someone? Trouble is magic is used more frequently by demons, and I don’t think the principal would be so hot on me coming to the Demon World to look for a teacher.*

“I believe,” he said, “that this map is actually a *ward*, one that opens the lair. That way if someone got ahold of copies of the map, like this one,” he shook the copy in his hand, “they could stand in front of it and do what these directions said all day. All they’d show for it is looking silly. Genius.”

“Yeah,” I say simply, impressed despite myself.

“So, I’ll send you as close as I can, which will be pretty close actually, and you can take it from there. Look for a large waterise, the lair is sealed up behind it. Put this map on the sealing stone and activate it like a *ward*, the stone should dissolve and get you access to the lair. Dragons aren’t known for traps, but be careful anyway.”

“I didn’t know you cared,” said Christina sarcastically.

“Just enough that *one* of you gets back here with the Rose.”

“Figures.”

“So, stand in a circle and I’ll *teleport* you there, you still have a *ward* to get back here on your own, right?”

I nodded, I had two more, and the extra one figured into my plans for the next time we came back here. I held out my hand for the copy of the map.

“What do you want this one for, it’s useless.”

“I promised it to a Naga in return for his piece of the map.”

“He foolishly gave away most of a dragon’s treasure, is what he means to say,” said Christina.

“You don’t have to say it like that!”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

I glared at her. The devil was chuckling, “He did a number on you, huh?”

“Oh no, he practically shoved it into the naga’s hands all on his own, not that I’m bitter about it.”

“It was just a slip of the tongue!”

“Just?”

The devil had begun chanting again, this time adding in precise, quick gestures with his hands, and another magical circle formed on the floor beneath us. He almost didn’t manage the spell, he was trying so hard not to laugh, but he made a final cutting gesture and we found ourselves elsewhere. I could just imagine him, now doubled over with laughter.

“Thanks a lot,” I said to Christina, walking away.

“Actually, it’s better for us if he thinks you’re a bit dim. Maybe that’ll make him underestimate you, should it come to a fight.”

“Oh, so your mocking me was all part of the plan! I see. That’s totally different then, isn’t it?”

We followed the river upstream, figuring if the waterfalls ran up here, thus becoming a “waterise” like the devil had said, we would find it in the direction of the water flow. Sure enough, we came in sight of a reverse waterfall, the water climbing up a cliff to continue somewhere up top. We got as close as we could on both sides, but didn’t see any space between the water and the rock we could squeeze ourselves into. At least it wasn’t blood, or acid, or something even worse.

“So how to we get behind it?” asked Yasui.

“We’ve got a lot of different powers here,” I remarked. “We should be able to figure out something.”

“I can reshape some of the rock here to make a barrier,” Albert said.

“I can make a pretty decent *barrier*, get us close enough,” said Christina.

“And I can call on the ant spirit to help whichever of those we go with,” I said. “Osman, can you see if we’re in the right place?”

He concentrated on looking past the waterfall. “Hard to say,” he said. “There does seem to be a big rock right there, I can see it’s not exactly the same kind of stone as the surrounding rock. That’s probably the thing we have to put the map *ward* thing on. Oh, and there is some kind of spirit energy behind the water, that much I can see for sure.”

“Right,” I said, deciding. “We’re going to try the *barrier* first. I don’t want to disturb the landscape here any more than is necessary. I don’t see anyone around here but if we start tearing stuff up, I don’t think Albert putting it back will get it exactly the way it was, and someone might come

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investigate. So it's up to you, Christina. Just let me call on the ant first so I can help you."

I spent a few minutes chanting so the ant spirit would stay around awhile, and succeeded in calling him well enough to get his ability. Technically I wasn't sure it would even work here in the Demon World. When it did, I started to wonder if these "spirits" weren't spirits at all. Rather a technique like Yasui's *spirit clone* that *shaman* were just told were spirits. I didn't have time to think about it now, so I nodded to Christina that I was ready and she concentrated on putting up a *barrier*. We slowly walked into the water, and I made suggestions based on my new understanding of how *barriers* worked, and we found there was just enough of a ledge to stand on so we could work. I had the map/*ward* in my hand, and water was streaming around us, pounding on the barrier.

"I can't hold it for long!" said Christina, her teeth clenched. "Hurry it up."

I slapped the map against the rock but Yasui grabbed my arm.

"Wait, won't the water come in here with the rock gone?"

*Didn't think of that*, I thought. "Oh crap—"

"Leave that to me," shouted Albert over the roaring water. "Just do it."

I nodded and put my hand on the middle of the map, sending some spirit energy into it and activating it. The rock face disappeared and we stumbled inside, the water now swirling down the passageway. Albert pushed us all inside and bent down, touching the ground. He looked at both edges and concentrated, and I realized what he was going to do, and shouted a suggestion to him. He nodded and suddenly the rock around the hole deformed and slammed shut, leaving us in silence as the water stopped flowing around us. Christina let the *barrier* go, leaving us in darkness, and I pulled the sunlight dagger out of my pouch and illuminated the passageway.

"Oh super, we're closed in again!" Christina said sarcastically. "I have so much fun with you guys, I just can't even tell you."

"Sorry about that," I replied, watching the water drain away down the passageway. "Nice going Albert, that was some fine work."

"I guess I judged the material appropriately," he said modestly. "And what you said helped a little too."

"What happened to map?" asked Osman.

"Burned up. It was a *ward*, after all."

Osman smiled. "Thought so. Hope naga enjoys getting past water and into cave on his own, without real map to guide him."

We all chuckled, and started down the passageway, with me in the lead with the light.

"I just hope the treasure didn't get all messed up from the water," said Donald.

"I don't think so, look." I pointed, and there was a channel cut out of the floor in front of us, and the sides of the tunnel sloped up a little. It looked like the water flowed into that, and then out, probably underground someplace. I wasn't sure how I realized that, but then recalled the spirit of the ant also helped with understanding underground things, so that's how I must have realized it. We walked on.

It wasn't a long walk, and I'm not sure how long I stood and stared at the heaps of gold and other treasure that came into view at the end of the tunnel. It opened up into a large space before us, and everything glittered in the sunlight from my dagger.

"Well," I said, finally shaking myself out of my daze. "We still have a job to do. Find something you want to carry out of here, but only one thing. That naga may have a way of telling if we don't follow the letter of the deal, if he can even get in here, so best not to take chances." I held the dagger high, but then Katrina thought to me, *I'll hold it up, you focus on finding the Rose*. I held the dagger in my palm and it lifted off, settling into the center of the chamber.

"Thanks Kat."

We split up and started pawing through the treasure looking for something special, but I was keeping my eye out for the Rose. I shouldn't have bothered, it was quite obvious where it was. I noticed a pedestal right in the center, and underneath a glass dome glittered the Ruby Rose, my parent's salvation. Looking at it, I realized I could study it for years and not truly know it, that was how flawless it was. The delicate petals that made it up had detail I could have sworn went into the microscopic. Truly, it was a work of art unmatched in all the world.

"It's a *Philosopher's Stone*," said Albert in a hushed voice, "I'm sure of it. Somehow it's been grown into this shape, not crafted. It must have taken a lifetime to create the conditions that would give rise to such a shape. No wonder it's so valuable. Astonishing."

I had no choice but to agree.

Yasui went a little crazy, decking herself out in jewels and gold, and strutting around like a queen. We were all laughing, it was a good feeling, knowing that our mission would soon be over. However, while she was messing around I was *sending* everyone my plan.

## DUE PROCESS

*Here's what we're going to do, I thought to them. And no-one say anything because he could be watching us via magic. I expect him to betray us, so we're not just handing this Rose over. Yasui and I are going to make spirit clones after I put the dagger away, right before we all step into the ward circle. His attention will then be focused on you guys, delivering the fake Rose. After a minute the real me and Yasui will step through and circle around the back of the place, and get in through the wall or a window or something. He doesn't produce my parents, or he goes back on the deal or whatever, we'll attack from hiding, and you guys take him from the front. If he does let my parents go he gets the real Rose, that I'll have with me. Yasui, say you wish we could stay if you understand this plan.*

"Well, I guess we should get going," I said.

"Oh, I wish we could stay," said Yasui, "This is fun!"

"I know, but my parents are counting on me, you know that."

"I know. Did everyone find something they'd like to bring?"

Everyone nodded. "Make sure you've taken everything else off," I said to Yasui. "I don't want any accidents."

She checked herself over, and her pockets, but left a beautiful tiara with gold and gems on her head, as that's what she decided on. For myself, I found a very simple, but large gold brick that Albert assured me was 100% pure, and fit nicely into my pouch. The others had various things that had caught their eye, and Donald was almost glowing himself, having found a very old pocket watch he said was worth a couple of million dollars.

"I'm certain it's the Breguel & Fils 2667," he said. "How it ever got here I can't begin to imagine. I heard about it disappearing years ago, never thought I would be the one to find it. And here, of all places. How do I explain how I have it when I go to sell it?"

"But of course getting my parents back is the real victory of the day."

"Yes, that goes without saying."

"Knife please," I said, holding my hand out. "By the way, does Kat count as a person? She could carry something out with TK, after all, right?"

"Yes she could! Did you see anything you liked?" asked Osman.

The knife floated over to me, and after it dropped into my hand, a huge yellow diamond rose out of the pile. Albert held up a hand.

"I could make you one of those," he said. "I mean, it's okay if you just want it to display as a souvenir, but like I said, I could make you something like that easily. There's no restriction on making diamonds with my powers, only gold. Heck, modern science can make diamonds now, in a lab,

you don't even need to be an *alchemist*. They're only valuable because you've been tricked into thinking they are. So I'd recommend something gold, as that's the only thing I can't make for you."

*Actually, isn't that true with gold, too? The value of that stuff is way out of proportion to its actual usefulness as a metal. We live in the world we live in, I guess.*

The diamond dropped and clattered to the ground, and a large gold statue of a nude woman, her hair flung about her, and with what looked like the sun's rays streaming out behind her, rose up instead.

"An excellent choice," said Albert, grinning widely.

"Let's do this!" I said, getting out the *ward* to travel. "Remember, someone can grab that statue from Kat only *after* we're out of the cave. We have to walk out each holding only one thing." I stuck the knife in my pouch, plunging the cave into darkness. Hurriedly I whispered "*spirit clone*" to call out that power, and heard Yasui do the same. I mentally kicked myself for not drawing on the power of my *talisman* before I did this, but put the maximum *spirit energy* into the technique I could. I felt four clones appear, and three of them and myself hurriedly backed off.

"Hurry it up!" I heard Christina say. *Clever girl*, I thought.

"Sorry, shouldn't have put the dagger away, but I didn't want to appear armed when we came back! I'm throwing it now!" said my clone.

He activated the *ward* and threw it down, illuminating us a little, and everyone stepped through, leaving the four of me there. I waited a moment, then whispered to Yasui, "how many did you get?"

"Three," she whispered back.

"Fantastic," I chortled. "He won't know what hit him."

**The Rescue**

*But you're just... mice.*

As I walked into the castle for what I hoped was the final time I pondered the nature of my existence. *What, exactly, am I?* I thought to myself. *I'm a spirit clone but what exactly does that mean? How can focusing my spirit energy in a certain way produce a number of identical copies of myself, complete with all my equipment and abilities? Well, I reflected, my original's abilities, as I'm just a copy, myself.* I shook my head. *The nature of spirit energy is a true mystery, one my original self will no doubt spend his life trying to unravel.*

As I walked I activated my armor *talisman* and did a *spirit manipulation* so I could draw power from my first. I could feel the tension coming off my friends as they walked by my side, and I gripped the Rose tightly in my left hand. The two devils again let us pass, their eyes glued to the Rose in my hand, and then followed us in. Ahead of us I saw the devil we'd been dealing with, smiling widely.

"So you've returned?!" he said excitedly. "And I see you have the Rose!"

"What I don't see is my parents," I said quietly.

"Not to worry, Dean, my worthless subordinates are bringing them out now, they'll be here in just a moment. Oh yes, the Rose is magnificent, isn't it?"

"It has a certain charm," I replied, scanning the room. Nothing seemed different or out of place, but I really wish I knew *spirit sense* so I could see if there was anyone hiding around here. We waited a moment, which was fine with me, I needed to stall in order to allow my original time to get in place. I heard the rattle of chains before I saw them, two gaunt

people shuffled through a door at the back of the room. Their eyes lit up when they saw me, and they started to smile and strain against the chains, trying to get closer to me.

“Dean?” said the woman.

“Is it really you, son?” said the man.

Almost I ran to them, but I knew the original me might need more time, so I restrained myself.

“How do I know these two are really my parents?” I asked. “They could be anyone.”

“What, you want me to provide a DNA analysis?” the devil snarled. “Forget it. Either accept them as your parents, which they are, or not, I don’t care. Now hand me the Rose and take them out of here.”

“Are you all right?” I asked them.

“Yes, we’re fine, son,” said the woman. “You don’t even know me, do you? It’s me, Barbara, your mom. Oh you’ve grown so much, haven’t you?”

“Oh, shut up,” yelled the devil. “You can do the whole family reunion thing when you’ve left, I don’t want to be vomiting for the next hour.”

“Fine,” I said, walking over to the table. I set the Rose down and took a step away from it to the right, and the devil took a step towards it. “Chains first, then you can have it.”

“Don’t you trust me?” he asked. He gestured to the two devils behind my parents, and they took a key ring and started looking for the key to unlock the chains. It took them a moment, which again was fine by me, but they got all the locks undone and the chains fell away, freeing the people he called my parents. I took another step away from the Rose as they ran towards me, arms raised to hug me, and they swept me into an embrace.

“Oh Dean, thank you for coming to get us,” said my mother.

“Your mother and I never lost hope that you would become the fine young man you are today,” said my father.

That’s when they both stabbed me in the back with knives.

What they didn’t expect was my *talisman* armor, which deflected the blades and gave me enough of an opening to release my *spirit projection*, which I’d been holding back just in case something like this happened. It roared out of me and sent a blast of energy into them from each hand. They spoke a word and flung their hands upward, and the attacks harmlessly deflected and punched through the ceiling.

## DUE PROCESS

“Kill them!” the devil shouted, “kill them all!”

My “parents” shimmered and standing there were two more devils, so I counted seven in total, given the gate guards would no doubt join the fight.

Christina acted instantly, she was probably expecting something like this, and almost in the blink of an eye she had her bow in her hand. When last I saw her use *Spirit Grades* it took a few seconds, but somehow she was able to pull it off almost at the same time as pulling out her bow, and a nimbus of power surrounded her. Osman jumped the couch by the table and shouted “I can’t fight, but give me the *wards!*” and I knew just what he was talking about. As I moved my hand to reach into my pouch the devil who was holding my “mother” started to say something and gesture towards where my friends were. Christina put an arrow into his chest, almost fatally wounding him, but he was still standing. The spell he was casting fizzled, nothing more than a wave of heat from the center of our group.

“Scatter!” yelled Yasui.

“No area effect spells,” yelled the devil we’d been talking with, “you’ll take the whole place out!”

One of the devils who was guarding the castle entrance was only a split second behind the first in casting something, but seemed to change his mind as he heard his boss say that, and his spell also fizzled. The one right next to him barked out a different word and a stream of fire lanced out at Yasui, who had just started to move towards him. The fire narrowly missed her right arm as she threw herself to one side, and it harmlessly bounced off the wall behind her.

The demon that was holding my “father” suddenly flew off his feet and careened into the one with the hole in his chest, sending them both sprawling. *Nice one Kat*, I thought. Meanwhile, Albert had crouched down and touched the floor, causing the rock underneath them to flow up and encase them. They both barely made it out of the way in time, so they were still free.

My beaver sent another stream of energy towards both devils still nearest to me, but again, both of them said a word and the attacks harmlessly bounced off. *As long as it keeps them busy and not slinging spells at my friends, I’m satisfied with that.* At the same time, Yasui and Donald both leapt for the nearest devil, Yasui feet first, Donald with claws at the ready. Yasui did a quick double strike with both legs but the devil dodged both and stuck out its tongue, mocking her. The devil that Donald was closest to

happened to be one that posed as my father, and he was too busy fending off my energy blast to notice, so werewolf claws cut into him and shallowly gouged his chest.

“I’ll kill you, Dean!” said the demon I was dealing with, and cast his fire spell. I only noticed out of the corner of my eye, and turned as I reached into my pouch saying “acceleration *wards*,” pulling them out. I turned into the fire, hoping my armor would take it, as I didn’t want Osman getting burned if I dodged it. Luckily for both of us it did, and the fire splashed harmlessly off, which enraged the demon further. I quickly handed all but one of the *wards* to Osman, who slapped one on me, activating it. The devils seemed to slow down a little, so I knew it was working. I returned the favor, slapping one on him and activating it.

To my right, Christina attacked the one guard, and Albert darted forward to help, attacking high (he was nearly three meters tall, after all) while she went low. Between the two of them they managed to tear the devil apart, and got ready to attack the one next to him, who was looking a little more concerned now. The devil that Donald just hit took a swing at him with his claws, making Donald jump back a step to dodge, which he narrowly did. The devil posing as my mother launched into the air and threw fire down at my *projection*, which pulled energy through my *talisman* and narrowly dodged. I wasn’t sure if getting hit would make me dissipate, as I only took a small part of the damage that my *projection* did. I felt it was too early to reveal my nature, so I breathed a sigh of relief as the fire hit the spot he was standing and disappeared.

Albert and Christina turned to face their next opponent, who said a word and raised a hand to shoot fire at Yasui. He was yanked off his feet just as the fire started to gather and sent barreling into the other two, who hadn’t quite untangled themselves. This sent them sprawling and made the shot go wild.

*Thank goodness for telekinesis*, I thought to myself.

“All right, fine!” the devil to my left shouted, flapping towards my beaver.

*What’s he up to?* I wondered. He made a grab for my *projection* and though my beaver tried to dodge out of the way, the devil grabbed hold of him. One of the thrown demons got back up and looked around for a target. He saw his fellow devil with the hole in his chest and brought his hands up to cast a spell. Yasui leapt into the midst of them and spun, one leg out, trying to hit all three of them in one swing. The one that had gotten up managed to dodge, but the other two were not so lucky; she smacked one in the

wing and one in the leg, knocking them around some more. They both howled in pain, but Yasui ignored them and finished pivoting, then lashed out with her other leg towards the one that dodged earlier. He dodged that too, skipping back a step to get some room. Albert looked up to see the devil flapping around the ceiling, and drew his chainsaw sword while spreading his wings to take to the air himself. Osman noticed him about to take off and ran over there, slapping a *ward* on him and activating it.

“Thanks!” said Albert.

Donald, Christina and the devil that Donald were fighting all acted simultaneously, the devil and Donald both slashed at each other, Donald getting the worst of the exchange as the devil ripped a chunk out of his stomach. The devil paid for it though, as Christina stepped to her left and fired, piercing his chest. The devil staggered but didn’t go down, and Christina went to pull her bow back again.

The devil with the gaping hole in his chest unsteadily got to his feet and looked around, deciding if he should beat a hasty retreat and possibly get killed later by his boss, or stay and possibly get killed now. His decision was made for him as the demon in the air shouted something and his chest wound nearly closed up. He smiled over at Yasui, who was still turned away from him, and readied his claws to strike.

I knew I couldn’t let this devil do whatever he wanted with my *projection*, and I noticed an opportunity, so I also took a step to my left and fired off a careful energy bolt. Careful because it would really have been embarrassing to hit my own *spirit projection*. I tried to hit both the devil that grabbed my *projection* and ideally the one fighting my father, as they were in a straight line. It didn’t work out so well. The first really, really wanted to hang onto my *projection* so while he tried to dodge, he didn’t pull his tail in all the way, so I grazed him with it, hardly hurting him. I hoped the other would be too busy getting shot with arrows and being clawed to death but he noticed and also hopped out of the way. The devil holding my *projection* concentrated, and to my surprise, vanished! I felt a funny- something- and my *projection* turned to me and said, “What’s the plan now, Dean?”

“Did you just *possess* my *spirit projection*?” I asked, aghast.

Meanwhile, Christina and Albert acted, Christina putting another arrow into the devil fighting my father while Albert spun the chain of his sword and shouted “Spin!” making his chainsaw sword come to life. He flapped his wings and took off towards the devil in the air. Christina’s arrow sped towards the devil, who tried to dodge out of the way but not well

enough, it impacted his arm and nearly took it off, making him cry out in pain and grab it. Cold formed around him, rushing at him as Katrina tried to use *cryokinesis* to finish him off, which at least succeeded in knocking him out, a chunk of ice now around his body.

Osman stuck Donald with an acceleration *ward*, leaving him with one. Yasui spun again, now facing two upright devils and shouted “A little help here?” but the wildness of her kick made her miss them all, but at least forced them away from her a little. The devil inside my *projection* smiled at me and said “Hey Dean, think you would survive if I blew my own head off right now?” My beaver raised his hand to his head. I started laughing a little, I couldn’t help it. He looked at me quizzically.

The last demon that was down got up, leaving Yasui facing three devils now, and she tensed to jump out of there again. Donald, unaware my projection had been taken over, sprang at one of the devils surrounding her and drove him to the ground. He raised a claw to slash downward. Albert slashed at the devil in the air, nearly chopping him in half, and he fell to the ground with a thud. Albert followed him down, sword raised to complete the job. Only three devils were left now, but the one possessing my *projection* wasn’t taking any chances.

“Stop,” he roared, “or I swear I’ll kill Dean where he stands!”

Everyone froze, looking over at me, and the sounds of combat instantly died.

I couldn’t help myself from laughing at this, “He’s *possessed* my *spirit projection*,” I said. “As if that will do him any good.”

“I see you’ve got some kind of magic armor,” the devil snarled, “but I know you feel your projection’s pain, and take some part of the wounds it does. I cast *elemental burst* on myself right now and you’re going down, Dean, big time, armor or no.”

“Really?” said a voice from behind him. “Why don’t you try that and see how it works out for you?”

He spun, and his eyes nearly popped out of his head as he took in the three other *spirit clone* copies of myself and Yasui. All of them had out *spirit projections* and all the Yasui’s were doing some fancy footwork, eager to fight. All nine of them seemed to vibrate a little, and I guessed they all had copies of the Acceleration *ward* on them someplace. The devil glanced back and forth between all of them, “It’s got to be some kind of trick!” he yelled.

“No trick,” two of the Deans said together. They looked at each other and one gestured for the other to go ahead. “It’s just a *true martial artist*

## DUE PROCESS

technique that Yasui taught me. It's a *spirit clone*, and any damage that clones take just makes it dissipate."

"And the Rose?" he said, looking over at the table.

"Copied, along with everything else when I used the technique. That one will disappear once the technique ends. You'll get the real one once my parents are safely ready to leave."

"I could still take you," he said, and began a chant.

"It's over, give it up," said a new voice, which we all turned to look at. A very large Devil strode into the room through the open door, and gazed around at everything going on.

"You can let him up," he said to Donald, "This fight is over."

"But lord, I can still-

"Enough!" the large devil bellowed. "You blew it. He outmaneuvered you, because you underestimated him. You didn't have a plan in place to account for his varied abilities, I think because his father has been subservient to you for so long. You didn't realize what being a child of Cain really meant. Your loss. To be honest I don't even know if I could take this many fighters, so you sure as Heaven can't."

Donald climbed off the devil he had pinned, and it got up.

"Allow me to introduce myself," said the big devil. "Mephistopheles, at your service. If you don't mind, may I heal my subordinates before they die? I know you probably don't care, and they *were* stupid enough to go along with this plan. Them dying now denies me the pleasure of torturing them later, so..." he spoke a few words and the ice around the one melted, then he healed the worst injuries on the ones that needed it. "Go and get his parents," he commanded.

"No need for that," one of the Deans said, "we were so late to arrive because we were looking for them." He stuck his head through the wall, which peeled back to reveal two dirty looking people on the other side. "Turns out my father is a pretty decent *alchemist*," another Dean said. "So I'll have lots to learn from him over the summer."

"Well," said Mephistopheles, "if you'll just leave the Rose, the contract will be broken and they'll be free to go."

The Deans all pulled Roses out of their pouches, and set them on the floor by their feet. "I'll leave you all the Roses, one of which I swear to be the true Rose, which will remain when we depart. You'll forgive me for not letting my guard down around you."

"No, I respect that." he said. "But honestly, I left him in charge of this, he tried to screw you over so he wouldn't have to give up his

*alchemist* and *artificer*. You not only anticipated his betrayal, which honestly you would have been a total idiot not to see coming, and put a plan in place to get around it. If my subordinates were half as bright as you, I'd only need half of them." He looked over at the devil we had been dealing with, who was now out of my *projection* again and looking pale, if such a thing is possible for demons. "You are free to go. And may I say, well done."

"Thank you," I said respectfully, helping my parents walk. They were weak and gaunt, not used to walking around, so I knew their recovery would be a rather long process. We all left the castle without incident, and Yasui and I ended our *spirit clone* technique, leaving just one Dean and Yasui.

"It's so great to see you again!" said Donald, going to shake my father's hand.

"Let's save that until we're out of here," I said, "this is still the Demon World, after all."

"Oh," he said, abashed. "You're right."

I couldn't get everyone at once with the *talisman* I had, so I made a couple of trips. Finally we all stood in Iceland again, waiting for our "ride" back to the school.

While we waited I finally relaxed a little and looked over my parents. I had talked with them a little before, back in the castle. Really that was just to make sure they were okay and get them out of the dungeon/lab they were in.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Dean, your son."

They couldn't talk at all, they were too busy hugging me.

## DUE PROCESS

### *Epilogue*

Haniel stood elsewhere, his months of research leading him to this odd space, where what seemed like a wall of energy glittered and sparkled before him. Finding this space wasn't easy, but he had managed it, but still had only questions and not answers. He gazed at the wall, as though looking at it could make it reveal the secrets that lay beyond. The wall seemed infinite, expanding out in all directions limitlessly, but as he looked closer he could sense minuscule cracks, pinpricks, if you will, allowing whatever it was holding back to leak out. There was a flash, and a giant wheel of fire appeared above him, and through it dropped Michael, the prince of the Archangels. He did not look pleased.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, gazing down at Haniel. "Need I remind you that your task is to protect the Tree, nothing more. It is not to mess with things that don't concern you, like this." He gestured to the wall.

"My task," Haniel shot back, and putting a hand on his sword hilt, "Is the same as it has always been: Keep the world safe. Anything that threatens that goal does concern me, Michael. Be it a threat to the Tree or to the whole of the world makes little difference. You said that, when you gave me this blade that represented my office. At least, that's what I took your words to mean."

The two coldly regarded each other for a moment, and it was Michael who looked away first. Haniel dropped his hand from the hilt, relieved.

"I'll grant you that," Michael said at last. "I suppose it couldn't have been kept secret for much longer anyway."

"So what is this place? Something has made a lot of Heavenly forces jumpy, even you, based on how you stormed in here. I couldn't get much out of anyone, but what I did learn led me here, so what's the deal?"

“Think of this as a dam,” said Michael, placing a hand on the wall. “One that, without *her* interference, would have stood for all time. But now...” he shook his head.

“You mean it’s holding something back? What could be so dangerous to need all of this?” He swept his arm as if to take in the infinite wall before him. “What exactly is leaking out through those cracks?”

Michael answered quite simply, and it was almost ten minutes before either spoke again.

He had said only one word.

“God.”

## DUE PROCESS

While every attempt has been made to follow the official Paragon Demongate High setting rules exactly, the author, (that's me) wishes to note that this work was completed using a pre-production version of said rules and the old HDL version. Thus, certain things may have changed or no longer work in the same way between the novel and the rules. For example, the rules on how people use energy gained from Lay Lines dramatically changed when I was halfway through the book. Dean probably wouldn't have bothered making the fake Tyrfinn under the new rules because the benefit you get from them was lessened. There may also be certain stylistic differences between how the rules are presented and how I interpret them. For this I apologize.

Secondly, many things like *talisman* powers "require Narrator approval" so I apologize if your Narrator does not allow you to create the same ones I did. Please do not take their appearance here as the ultimate say that you may also create them. This was my story, so I made what I wanted, darn it!

This being said, the characters gained XP, spent energy, and raised their skills as per the normal Paragon base rules, so theoretically anything done here by various characters is possible in campaigns with careful planning.

Good luck in your own Demongate High adventures!

## DUE PROCESS

**Ameliorating Medicament:** A potion created by alchemy to increase a person's strength or agility, chosen when created. Lasts a couple of minutes after being consumed.

*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.

**Animation:** alchemy skill to give a semblance of life to objects, allowing them to move on their own. In this way a stone can be commanded to roll down a hill or a door to open or close itself.

**Aqua Vitae:** Alchemical water that slacks hunger and thirst with a single sip.

**Bloodiron:** An invulnerable metal, mined in the Demon World. Bleeds instead of rusting, if not taken care of properly, hence the name.

**Cain:** cursed with immortality, Cain is a progenitor forced to wander the earth. Very knowledgeable and has a host of powers at his command.

**Cambion:** A person of demonic ancestry within three generations. Shares some traits with both demon kind and humans, can ascend to the Heavenly realm at death.

**Cerberus:** Three headed dog that guards the demon gate below the school from intrusion.

**Chainsaw Sword:** Carried by Albert, a third year alchemy student. By using the Alchemical skill Animation, the chain will spin without need for any other power source. Chain is made of Blood Iron so it can harm invulnerable creatures.

**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.

**Combust:** An *ESPer* skill that can set objects on fire by exciting their molecular structure.

**Comprehension:** An *ESPer* skill that allows the meaning behind words to be understood even if the language of the person speaking is not. Can also be used to make yourself understood to the other person.

**Compulsion:** An *ESPer* skill to force a person to believe or take some action you suggest.

**Concrete Luminescence:** An alchemical substance that captures light and solidifies it. In this way a werewolf could carry the light of a full moon around with him, staying transformed, or a sword made of sunlight could be made to battle vampires. The better a person is with alchemy, the tougher, sharper or more durable the light can be made.

**Cruciatus:** Demons of torture, they take great pleasure in tormenting souls for as long as possible to turn them into new demons.

**Cryokinesis:** An *ESPer* technique to manipulate cold. Can freeze nearly any object, but happens slowly enough that a target can feel the drop in temperature and dodge.

**Demon Gate:** A tear in the fabric of reality that leads to the Demon World. Usually marked by a stone archway that serves as a *talisman* to keep it permanently shut.

**Demons:** The souls of the wicked, brought to the Demon World upon their death and tortured until reborn as a being of evil.

**Draw:** The amount of spiritual power a summoner or *petitioner* can sustain in this world. Each other worldly being has a “cost,” in draw, proportionate to the amount of powers they can access. All things being equal, angels typically have a higher draw as they will help a *petitioner* as long as the cause is just, while a demon requires other payment.

**Dreamer:** A new, undiscovered power found to reside in several Demongate High students. *dreamers* can step from their dream and enter reality, controlling it to a certain extent as though it too was a dream. Sadye Ransbot-

## DUE PROCESS

tom is the only known person in the world to have nearly mastered the skill, which she has done nothing but practice all her life under the watchful eye of her father.

**Elemental Aura:** A *cambion* technique to surround yourself in your element. Acts as a shield and can negate attacks of the opposite element.

**Emotional Influence:** An *ESPer* skill to change the emotions people around you are feeling. At a basic level an emotion can be made stronger or weaker, while at higher levels any emotional state can be induced in any individual.

**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.

**Energy Transfer:** A *spirit energist* skill that can move energy between people or ley lines, rather slow, but given time it can totally refresh someone that's out of energy.

**ESPer:** A person able to effect the physical world using only the power of the mind.

**Focus Senses:** A *true martial artist* ability to use spirit energy to sharpen the senses.

**Galeari:** The lowest ranking angel in the Heavenly Realms, and thus the easiest to petition.

**Gateway:** Summoners, Sprit Hunters and others have the ability to open a temporary hole between our plane and the Demon World. Petitioners can do the same, but between here and the Heavenly realms. These holes are short lived, as reality begins closing them almost immediately.

**Gold:** A heavy metal, highly sought after by both demons and humans alike. Gold created alchemically changes in molecular composition when passed between dimensions, becoming more like rock, which is one reason for its value as it is hard to counterfeit.

**Harionago:** A demon that at first glance appears human, but hungers for flesh almost continuously. Can control her hair as though it was an extra limb, and has a second mouth on the back of her head.

**Hereditary Power:** A supernatural ability passed through a family line, including Eyes of Far Seeing, Copycat Master, Descendent of Cain or Redirecting Heart. It is unknown how these abilities arise, but Foundation researches are learning towards a sort of supernatural mutation in the DNA of certain individuals which is passed down to children.

**Holy Chosen:** One chosen by the Heavens to wield holy power on earth. Their touch burns demons, and they can heal and consecrate places so demons can't enter. Any weapon they bless also does more harm to demons for a short time.

**Ignore:** A *ward* that makes people ignore whatever it's attached to. Basically allows a person to hide in plain sight, the more powerful the *artificer* that makes it, the more blatant the action that will be overlooked.

**Incendiary Ether:** A liquid that bursts into flames when it comes in contact with air.

**Inheritor:** One that has had a supernatural object as part of their heritage for many generations. Some are more attuned to this object than others and can more fully utilize their object's power.

**Invulnerable:** items or people that are invulnerable are completely immune to effects not supernatural in nature. A piece of paper made invulnerable could survive a nuclear explosion or pass through the sun unharmed, but could easily be cut by a pair of invulnerable scissors.

**Jiangshi:** A demon that takes the form of an old man that carries a lantern. The lantern holds the life force of the demon and stores his energy. Every four hours the demon must consume at least a tiny bit of this energy or die. Otherwise, he is immortal.

**Ley Line:** A conduit of energy that circles the earth. Using the spirit manipulation skill, one can draw energy from these lines to augment their own natural spirit energy.

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Manifestation: *spirit energists* are able to manifest a single weapon to help focus their abilities in battle. This weapon is composed of solidified spirit energy and can not be changed once created.

Memory Alteration: An *ESPer* technique to modify the memories of those around you. Memories can be erased, implanted or changed based on the skill of the *ESPer* making the modification.

Night Walker: Name Dr. Ransbottom gave to the phenomenon he was studying with his daughter. Three levels were found to exist. See Shadow, Terror, *nightmare*.

Nightmare: Stronger Shadow, has become solid and more dangerous. Uncomfortable in light, but not harmed. Can only be harmed by weapons that glow. Can create and maintain someone's deepest fear, which they use to keep a victim off balance and afraid. Not scary to look at, but somehow generate fear when looked upon by most.

Petitioner: Able to call down the help of angels like a Summoner calls upon demons. Assigned an angel at birth to be a protector and guide.

Phase: To enter a ghostlike state where other matter no longer considers you solid and thus, can be passed through as easily as walking through normal air.

Philosopher's Stone: Creation of this crystallized substance takes a year, and the permanent sacrifice of energy by the *alchemist*. However, when carried it boosts Alchemical ability, provides extra energy, and make the holder stop aging.

Phoenix: Holy bird of legend, now strictly found in the Heavenly Realm. Has healing abilities.

Pixie Power: Alchemical powder allowing those who are sprinkled to fly for several minutes.

Possession: A skill used by Demons and *cambions* to enter the body of another and control it. Demons can possess objects, while *cambions* cannot. While possessing, the demon can use any skills or powers either it or the

host knows or possesses, and takes no damage that the host takes.

Postcognition: An *ESPer* skill to trace the history of an object just by touching it.

Prefect: Four prefects selected per year, responsible for dormitory discipline and enforcing policies.

Progenitor: Early humans that could access any supernatural power available. Mostly destroyed in the flood, but rumors persist that some managed to escape death and still live on, apart from humanity, content to research new abilities and powers.

Quintessential Unguent: A supernatural oil created by alchemy which makes a substance it coats nearly frictionless.

Regeneration: A vastly accelerated healing ability possessed by some demons and *cambions*. Any wound short of death will heal in moments, and lifespans of those with the ability are greatly increased. Various speeds exist, meaning even near fatal wounds can be shrugged off in seconds by some.

Seers: A *ESPer* specializing in non-physical mental effects such as seeing invisible things, the future, or separating the truth from lies.

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.

Shadow: Often appearing around *dreamers*, these creatures are like shadows, insubstantial and hard to kill. Feed off fear in some way. Harmed by light.

Shapeshift: The power of some demons to take other forms. Most cast the shadow of their true form but rare individuals cast the shadow of the form they are currently in.

Songstrel: Able to create supernatural effects through song or music.

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**Soul Bound:** A Summoner technique to bind the soul of a human and a demon together, whereby the human and the demon share wounds but the human becomes harder to kill. Also allows telepathic communication between the two and frees up draw.

**Soul Transfer:** A ritual allowing a soul to be moved from one body to another, or from a body into an object, which then makes the original body unable to die. Only by destroying the object can the person be killed.

**Spirit Clone:** A *true martial artist* technique of creating temporary bodies made of spirit energy to confuse foes. Disappear after being struck.

**Spirit Energist:** A person who is gifted with the ability to work with spirit energy of all kinds. Can produce effects ranging from energy blasts to shields, and can manipulate or erase external energies.

**Spirit Focus:** Some individuals need a special tool or object to help them use their power. Much like an *inheritor* is nearly powerless without their inherited item, a spirit focus helps those that need it focus spirit energy. They are, in general, easier to come by, so one being lost or broken is not too serious.

**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 Hunter Society:** The loosely knit group of spirit hunters that oversees training and deployment of all spirit hunters. Teaches prejudice against demons and those who associate with demons, like *summoners*. Only recently have *spirit hunters* been allowed to attend Demongate High, mostly through the efforts of Carlita, a Spirit Hunter from Bolivia who sought a more formal education and later helped saved the world.

**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 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 Well:** The name given to those people born with an excess of energy. Up to four times the normal amount has been observed over the years, which does not make greater amounts impossible, but highly unlikely.

**Spirits, Calling:** A *shaman* technique to call on certain nature spirits to aid them. Each spirit grants a bonus to a stat or skill, and a special ability. Each spirit requires a certain chant and as a *shaman* grows in power, more people can be affected or a greater bonus can be begged of the spirits.

**Summoning:** To call a demon from the Demon World into ours. A specific ritual must be learned for each demon, and as each demon wants something different, they must be bargained with appropriately before they will serve the Summoner.

**Supernaturally Aware:** A regular human that, for one reason or another, can perceive unseen things like most people with powers can.

**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.

**Teleport:** Move from one place to another without physically crossing the space between. An *ESPer* can only *teleport* what they can carry, so people physically stronger can *teleport* more at once. Very advanced *ESPer* skill, requires mastery of two other skills to practice it.

**Terror:** Strongest class of Shadow. Shape is not constrained to physical reality so can appear as literally anything that causes fear in a victim. Can be as large or small as it wishes, and is constantly changing form and size to

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provoke greater terror by those that see it.

**The All-Father:** Known by many names, the Avatar of Order that separated the chaos of Primoris into the physical realities we know today.

**The Foundation:** The main organization tasked with keeping supernatural things away from humanity at large, and protecting humanity from demonic influence.

**Touched:** A person born without supernatural power that later acquires it in life. The effects of their power vary based on how their power came to them, and only some are able to perceive the unseen.

**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.

**True Martial Artist:** A *spirit energist* specializing in physical combat maneuvers, losing some *spirit energist* abilities but gaining others in exchange.

**Tyrfin:** Sword of Tyr, originally wedged in the jaws of Fenrir, the great wolf. Removed several years ago by the time this story happens. Extremely powerful, the supernatural equivalent of a small nuclear reactor, as vast quantities of energy can be drawn from it at will.

**Ubuntu:** A linux distribution able to be run from a CD, allowing a machine to be booted without using the hard drive.

**Unholy Chosen:** A person of great evil, chosen by a powerful Demonlord to do perverse works in the human world. Directly opposes the power of the *holy chosen*, and thus have the reverse powers of Unholy Touch, Corruption, Soul Corruption, Harming, etc.

**Unseen:** A supernatural trait that makes people not awakened to the super-

natural world totally overlook them as if invisible, inaudible, etc.

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 effects, 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.

Wizard: A person that practices magic, given to them through a deal with a demon. Looked down upon by The Foundation.