

Helping People Club

Demongate High Book 3

Other books by Robert Ziefel

Demongate High

Due Process

The Unveiled World

Helping People Club

Finding The Balance

Learning The World

No One to Blame

Paragon Universe

Lonely Divide

Monster Diaries

Diary of an Iron Dwarf

Diary of an Actress who Happens to be a Troll 1-2

Diary of Jesse Faden 1-2

The Embers of Pyre

Out of the Flood

Becoming the Villain

Conspiracy in the Clouds

Other

A Rational Dragon Warrior's Tale

Harry Potter and the Magic of Paragon 1-7

Susan's Chronicles 1-14

Lasanios Chronicles 1-10

Helping People Club Copyright © 2022 Robert Ziefel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages embodied in critical articles or in a review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, (especially dead), events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-312-23763-6

Published by Robert Ziefel

www.robertzprojects.com

Second Edition: 2022

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For My Grandfather

*The hardest working man I ever met
You were taken from us too soon
I miss you grandpa*

1

Clashing Worlds

You only go 'round one time

Ah, summer vacation! A time to relax, and to reflect upon the events of the previous school year. That is, unless your name is Dean Chesterfield, like me. In that case, you seek no reprieve from your self appointed mission to become the greatest talisman maker ever. That, and help people. It is helping someone where this chapter of my life began.

I was hardly back home a day, putting some things away from my talisman bag, when I heard the doorbell. Our house, located on the eastern edge of town, was situated in the very center of the supernatural world: Demongate Island. Smack in the middle of the ocean, the island was home to people with every sort of power imaginable. In fact, it was the only place on Earth you can regularly see people using powers. People flew, teleported, or were carried from place to place as their powers allowed, and no one looked twice. It was a paradise for a person like me, that could learn the basics of any power. I would be the first to admit, however, that it was also somewhat lonely. All my friends lived elsewhere in the world, and even though I was getting to know my parents again after rescuing them, we still weren't what you would consider a normal family.

My parents were both in the "lab," or basement as most people would call it, when the doorbell rang. The basement was part mad scientist "hackerspace," and part ancient alchemist laboratory. Both my father and mother specialized in making things, so they needed a lot of materials, space, and quiet to concentrate. They mainly created the items requested by the Foundation for use on missions, but the occasional individual request came in,

keeping them busy. So on one table you might see bunsen burners merrily flaming away, heating up a strange, swirling liquid while at a nearby table, spirit energy hung eerily in the air, waiting to be placed into an item.

As I knew my parents were probably both hard at work, and would rather not be disturbed, I quickly descended the stairs to reach the door before they rang again. I didn't really have any expectation, opening the door, as to whom it might be. My parents were called upon daily by various people, both for status reports or to pick up items. Yes, status reports could be done over the phone, but a lot of people with powers seemed to have somewhat of a blind spot where technology was concerned. Not that they were backwards, or didn't have access to it. No, quite often someone would teleport in only to later exclaim, "I totally forgot about my cell phone, I could have just called you!"

So someone coming by sometimes happened two or three times a day. It seemed most people had heard of my heroic rescue of my parents and were more than happy to linger a moment and discuss little tricks they had picked up in using their powers. As I couldn't attain the level of skill most people took for granted without years of effort, I focused on being efficient and sneaky with what I could do.

It was somewhat of a surprise then, when I opened the door to see the principal of the school, Lucien DeLefeu, and a very young looking girl looking back at me. The principal I knew well, as in the last two years of schooling I had come to him many times for advice on talismans and wards, that being my chief focus and what I was best at. He was in his mid fifties, with thinning grey hair. He was leaning on his cane, which...

"When did you start needing a cane, sir?" I blurted out.

He smiled. "Nice to see you too, Dean. It's only been a day but has vacation been treating you well?"

"Uh, yes sir. Thanks for asking. I am taking some summer classes though, as I'm sure you know. So it'll be pretty short for me."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Dean, Dean, Dean. You'll have taken over the world by the time you're thirty, won't you?"

"Eh, too much paperwork. I would rather just take over the Foundation so I can rule from the shadows." My smile fell. "I mean, I'm joking, of course."

"Of course."

My eyes darted around. I opened the door wider. "Uh, please, come in. And your young friend as well. Shall I go get my parents?"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Actually,” said Mr DeLefeu, stepping past me while leaning on his cane, “I’m here to ask your opinion on something. Elizabeth, this is Dean. Dean, Elizabeth.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, which she returned, shaking my hand. Elizabeth was probably a couple of years away from attending Demongate High, the school found smack dab in the middle of the island. She seemed a bit sad as she walked past me into my house, and I looked her over. She was average looking, with red hair, but which oddly had a white stripe down the middle. Thin glasses were perched on her nose, and was much shorter than me. As she passed I felt her spirit energy, which shocked me. It seemed muted somehow, like it might have been higher than mine at one time, but now it seemed like she didn’t have powers at all! I was intrigued, who had principle DeLefeu brought to see me?

As I brought them into the living room to sit down, I noticed her looking me over as well. She had a kind of “who have you brought me to see” look on her face, and I chuckled softly.

“The cane actually leads into Elizabeth’s story, which I hope she doesn’t mind me telling?” He looked over at her.

“If you think it will help,” she replied. “Is he going to help us track down Elizabeth?”

“I think you’ll find Dean rather surprising in a number of ways. With a little luck, we won’t have to.” She looked confused, and he turned back to me. “In any case, *you* haven’t come across anything more out of the ordinary than usual lately, have you?”

“Maybe one thing,” I answered, “but nothing like that.” I pointed to his cane.

“Yes, a bit of a surprise for me, as well. I just woke up recently and it seemed like I had two sets of memories. One set was me not walking with a cane, the other was the opposite.”

My eyes got wider. “That happened to me!” I exclaimed. “Not long after that weird guy came to us in our dream I woke up with the ant spirit being different. I would have sworn before that it would let me assist anyone with any skill. But now I remember learning it can only help someone with something they don’t already know how to do. I mean, if I had known that, why would I have bothered learning it?”

“That happened to me too!” said Elizabeth, looking surprised. “I didn’t want to mention it because it’s such a small thing compared to everything else. Are you a shaman then?”

“Sometimes,” I hedged. “I think I’ll want to hear your story before I tell you my own.”

Lucien gestured for her to go ahead, and she took a deep breath, looking resigned.

“It all started at the Valentine’s Day dance in February. A bunch of us, and I mean a lot of my classmates that were there got powers. All at once.”

“That’s possible?” I asked.

“It is now,” Lucien nearly snarled. “Apparently.”

“Go on.”

“Long story short, we got a sort of random mix of abilities, from cambions to petitioners. I got shaman and spirit energist, for all the good it did me.”

“Plus a little bit extra,” said Lucien.

“Right, like my copycat power and more energy. Those saved me more than being a shaman, let me tell you. In fact, being a shaman caused me no end of grief!”

“Really?” I was surprised. “Calling on spirits and calling out my spirit projection, which I still haven’t named, actually, is great.”

“Oh, it would have been. Sadly my teachers proved to be a bit evil. And by a bit, I mean a bunch. They were some progenitor cult trying to make their own army... out of a bunch of school kids.”

“Progenitors? That is bad news. Just one progenitor is like me on steroids, I can’t imagine a whole group of them.”

“Tell me about it. Wait, like you?”

“Long story.” I waved it off.

“Oh. Anyway, they hid the fact they could use all powers, and presented themselves to be just regular people who wanted to help. We only learned what they really were at the end.”

“And they were the ones teaching you?”

“Yeah, we were the test subjects for their insane little plan.”

“That must have been... intense?”

“That’s one word for it. My friends and I weren’t sure if we could trust them, and what was worse, after only a few weeks they started sending all of us on ‘missions,’ which I never really understood. I mean, fighting demons with only a couple of weeks training seemed like suicide! And we had some close scrapes.”

“It was probably supposed to be like that. See which people got the best powers, so they could be focused on for the indoctrination.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Yeah, well, we survived somehow. Many did choose to go with them, but not all.”

“Now wait a second, where was the Foundation during all of this?” I glared at Lucien.

He tapped his cane. “Good question.”

“You can’t mean- a whole group of kids?”

“A whole group of kids. Their story is that they heard about us, and that we were ‘too busy doing our own thing’ to come and help. Something about some fight between us and spirit hunter society or something?”

“Nothing like that happened, did it?”

“No, you would have heard about it. That’s what’s most disturbing about this. Even worse than finding all those buses that had been stranded in time. At least those kids belonged on the island.”

“You aren’t kidding. I mean, even if there was some war going on or something, certainly upperclassman could have been spared to go every few days and train these- how old are you, anyway?”

“You should never ask a lady her age,” Elizabeth said, putting her nose in the air.

“She’s fourteen,” said Lucien.

“Humph!”

I stared at Elizabeth. This little girl was fourteen? Well, some cambions stopped aging when their powers came in, and I didn’t have the whole story yet. Or maybe she was just really short. “Right. Heck, just sending me in would have been enough, I could give all the classes. At least, the basics- Anyway, go on.”

“At the end, when the Foundation showed up and helped, we scattered Zephyr but didn’t know what good it would do. They know they can unlock powers in people now, they’ll just be more selective this time.”

“Crazy. But what does all this have to do with me?”

Lucien looked at Elizabeth, who seemed to deflate a little. “During our battle with them, I got cursed, and my powers ran away,” she said. “And just a week after I got them under control, too. It stinks!”

“Ran away?”

“Literally. Separated from me, became a being apart from me, and ran off. Leaving me with nothing but this funny streak in my hair.”

I nodded comprehendingly. “You want me to get them back for you!”

“Can you do that?” She seemed hopeful for the first time.

“Tricky,” I said after a moment. “I helped one girl, an ESPer, get her powers back. But that wasn’t a curse. I’ll need some more specifics.”

“And you know the person with the talisman that can get them for you,” said Lucien with a wink.

“Yasui!”

He nodded. “Right. I’ve requested they come to the island, and a Foundation ESPer should be bringing them along in a moment.”

“Them? Yasui is she/her... unless that got changed too?”

He shook his head. “I thought Osman might be helpful, his eyes might see something we miss.”

“Good thought. We are the soon to be Helping People Club, might as well get started! So this cane and spirit and...” I gestured to Elizabeth. “What do you think it all means?”

He shrugged. “You closed dreamer power off from the world. It looks like the power was more extensive than we thought, or was changing the world somehow. That’s our best guess, given the two happened so close together. Now it’s like alternate realities are coming together, or something.”

“Ah, but correlation does not imply causation!”

“True, they may be unrelated. But apart from that odd business in Florida a little while ago, we have nothing else to go on.”

“I see. At least you’re keeping an eye on it. Man, all those kids from out of time from before, and now a school full of kids who wouldn’t have had powers otherwise. Good thing we have plenty of space around here!”

“We can use the help, too, once everyone gets trained. There will be more powered individuals in the world at once then ever before because of this.”

“Then the war is nearly won, right?” I joked.

“I wish that were so.”

I asked Elizabeth some questions about her experiences, and there was another ringing of the doorbell, and both Osman and Yasui were standing there. There was another man there too, probably the ESPer that had brought them.

“Didn’t you guys just leave?” I joked.

“You know us, Dean, can’t leave you alone for five minutes,” said Yasui with a grin.

Lucien went to talk to the guy, and I introduced my friends to Elizabeth. I told them the shortened short version of Elizabeth’s adventures, and made sure Yasui had brought the Time Frame. She said she had, and patted the bag she was carrying.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

The ESPer disappeared with a *pop* and Lucien turned back to us.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Better tell my parents I’m going out,” I figured, “just a second.”

I ran down and told them what was going on, and they said to try and be back by dinner. I said I would, then went back upstairs and stepped into the circle of light coming from the ward on the ground, no doubt created by Lucien.

I found myself in a rather dank cave, and pulled the sunlight knife out of my pouch, holding it high.

“Sorry about that, forgot it was dark in here now. They had lights going before,” apologized Lucien.

“Is that knife made of... what is that knife made of?” asked Elizabeth.

“Pure happiness,” I said. She looked at me skeptically. I laughed. “Sunlight, actually. I’ve never fought a vampire, but I’m ready if I ever have to.”

“Right.” She didn’t seem convinced. “It was over here, but how is being here going to help?” she asked Lucien.

“You’re just going to have to trust me,” he said. We went over to where she pointed, and there were some signs of a battle having been fought here. There were odd buildings made of stone nearby, and it seemed like we could only see a small part of a much larger underground city.

“This is only a small part of a much larger underground city,” said Lucien. “They were using it as a barracks before. There’s a sort of temple way over there.” He pointed. “We haven’t found any traps, but best to stay away from it, get our business done here and go. Once this is done we’re going to destroy the whole place.”

Elizabeth got a dreamy look on her face.

Yasui got out the Time Frame, and Elizabeth shook her head and told her the time to view. She started it up and we looked around. There was Elizabeth, with what must have been one of her friends. They were facing a stern looking man who was tying a pouch onto his belt.

“Pause it,” I said to Yasui, who did. “Just how much training did you have?”

“It was one hundred and twenty-two days since we got powers to the day you’re looking at here.”

“You can give me an estimate if you don’t know the exact number,” I said sarcastically. She just glared at me. “You stood there, knowing what he was and what he could do? With less than four months training?”

“Like you said, it was an intense four months.”

“I guess it must have been. Okay, play it forward.”

“It happens right at the beginning,” said Elizabeth. “Listen to what he says.”

I looked over at the Time Frame. *Had it always done sound and video? I thought it only did video, and I'm the guy who made it, so I should know. Weird.*

The man pointed at Elizabeth. “If you defeat me your power will no longer be under your control,” he said, smirking.

Elizabeth held up a hand and Yasui paused it again. I stared. “That’s not a curse. That’s a... a... I don’t even know what to call that. That actually worked?”

“It worked all right.”

“That’s impossible. I never learned to play around with curses because they seemed really dangerous, but even I know a curse has to have some kind of cure.”

“Well,” hedged Lucien, “they can also have a means of prevention. But you’re right, that wasn’t normal. Keep watching.”

Yasui started it up again, and we watched in morbid fascination as Elizabeth and her friend, Matt, threw energy bolt after energy bolt at the progenitor. Nothing fazed him.

“You’re both using the same technique, is that the thunderbird spirit?” I asked.

Elizabeth nodded. “One of only two spirits I was able to learn. You’ll see why in a second.”

The battle raged on, and they were joined by another boy, who Elizabeth called Sam. He looked like a spirit hunter, but even with three people fighting him, the man didn’t seem too concerned.

“Who was this guy?” I asked, aghast. “How much energy did you all throw at him during this battle?”

“Nearly all of it,” answered Elizabeth. “I used the last of it to do this-” She pointed, and we watched the younger her call out her spirit projection, which seemed to be an ant.

“Why didn’t you do that in the first place?” I asked, holding up a hand so Yasui paused it again.

“Too risky. You’ll see.”

“Okay.”

The ant didn’t have any time to react, as after all that, an angel called by Matt tore through the man’s neck, severing his head.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“All that, and an angel ended it?” Osman asked, rather disappointed. “I’ll have to learn that angel though.”

But the scene wasn’t over. The head rolled around and spoke yet another curse. “May your luck turn on you when you need it the most,” he said, and died.

“Okay, that was a death hex, so I guess it doesn’t need a cure.”

“There,” said Elizabeth, pointing through the frame at an angle. “Take a look at Anthony.”

“You named your ant spirit Anthony?” I asked. But suddenly the ant was wreathed in fire, and a beautiful woman stood there. Younger Elizabeth was staring at her in horror, and then the woman basically thanked her and left.

“And that’s how I lost my powers,” explained Elizabeth sadly. “Do you really think there’s any hope for getting them back?”

“Wait, this doesn’t make sense. Yasui, run it back to where she’s cursed again, will you?” Again, the man pointed and spoke the curse. “Yeah, this makes no sense. He specifically pointed at you, Elizabeth. He didn’t say ‘your group’ or ‘if anyone in the next hour’ he said *you* specifically. But you didn’t defeat him, heck, you didn’t even scratch him. That angel was the one that bit his head off. How did the curse take effect?”

“You’ve got me,” said Elizabeth, shrugging. “You’re the supposed expert.”

“I am the supposed expert!” I said with confidence. I turned to Lucien. “What the heck?”

“We don’t know. Best guess is, he’s using something that looks like a mystic hex, but which isn’t.”

“Hummmmm. That could be. After all, they’ve had a lot more time to figure stuff like that out. They could be using powers we haven’t considered. But wait, how could he use a death hex? He’s not a mystic!”

“True,” said Lucien seriously. “However we do have only a limited amount of information about them. Conventional wisdom states that only people like you, Dean, can unlock that sort of thing through study. Progenitors, from what we know, can’t. Perhaps we were misled in some way though, and they can. It’s hard to know, they’ve never really been keen on sharing what they can do with us.”

“So who was that woman?” asked Yasui.

“That was who I was trying to get under control this whole time,” answered Elizabeth.

A light dawned for me. “You got a sundered spirit along with all the rest?”

She nodded.

“No wonder you didn’t want anything to do with your powers. Man!” I looked at this small girl with a new respect. “Suddenly getting powers, being trained by evil people, and on top of that your power could go crazy at any moment and get away from you. That was harsh.”

“I know. I did so much work on her prison it’s not even funny. Hours of dragging steel plates around underground, in my head, making her that cozy little underground hideaway. Wasted. If you can somehow get my power back, that would be great. I never wanted it, but now I can’t even see one of my friends when he’s using his power. Plus, if you can break my curse, maybe you can help Matt break his, too.”

“This is going to be tricky!” I said, pacing. “Very tricky. Osman, what do you see?”

Osman stared at her.

“There’s a darkness inside her,” he said at last. “But I’m not sure what I would do about it.”

I thought a moment more. “Would you mind if I looked at your soul? It probably won’t provide any clues, but I have to say I’ve tried everything before I give up.”

“My... soul? Sure, I guess?”

“Great! Lay down and relax, this will just take a moment.”

She did, and I set my hand on her stomach. She glared at me.

“I wonder if I could just touch an arm. Oh well, too late now. Don’t fight me on this, it’s hard enough as it is.”

She nodded, and with some effort I got her soul out and took a look. Like Osman had said, even her soul had a sort of hole in it.

“It’s different from Asteraceae though,” said Osman, looking at it. “If I had to explain the difference to someone, I would say this soul was cut, where the one before was burned.”

“It feels different,” Katrina’s illusion said to us. “Though of course I’m better at feeling stuff out now, so maybe that’s helping.”

“So if I’m understanding this,” I said, showing the soul to Lucien. “Because of this curse, or whatever it was, a part of this girl’s soul broke off and became mobile.” He nodded. “Could we somehow track it down, and have an actual soul wielder stick them back together?”

“What do you think, given what you know about the powers of a soul wielder?”

“I was afraid you would say that. And there won’t be a talisman that can help, as this has probably never happened before. Man, I wish dreamers were still around so we could just go back in time!” I let the soul go, and Elizabeth stirred.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Actually, I was hoping you would bring that up,” said Lucien. “As that might be the only solution.”

“But we cut off that power! Unless Sadye has retained some of it?” I asked hopefully.

Lucien shook his head. “Nope, we’re back to the old standby.” He drew a ward out of his own pouch, and handed it to me.

“I’ve never seen one this complex,” I exclaimed. “Don’t tell me-”

“It’s technically forbidden, but I think in this circumstance it’s justified.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were wide. “You can even time travel? I knew a guy who could make those paper tag things, before he got killed. But you saw that progenitor. He curses me right off the bat!”

“Exactly. We’ll have to time it exactly right. But Dean, there is a danger in using this ward, and that’s why we don’t allow just anyone to learn it.”

“I figured there was. What is it?”

“Two things. The first is energy. It takes a lot to stay back in time. Figure it drains enough to kill a normal person every second you say in the past. Even you won’t have long.”

“That’s not very long!” I agreed. “What can I even do in a couple of seconds?”

“I hear you’re fond of the contain ward.”

“Sure, put an object into a piece of paper. But that won’t hold a living thing for long, I’m not that great at wards yet. And if that guy gets loose...” I trailed off.

“But you would have enough time to use another ward before that, taking him by surprise.”

“I suppose, I could hold one in each hand. What are you thinking of?”

“Cut.”

“Oh, I get it. Chop his head off, suck the now ‘unliving’ head into the contain ward, and bury it someplace. What’s the other thing? You did say two.”

“You have to be looking at the exact time you want to go to. No problem with that here, thanks to your foresight.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Okay, that sounds good. Get me a cut ward and I’ll go at it.”

“Wait a second,” said Osman. “Isn’t this plan a bit hasty? I mean, you’re talking about changing the past. It worked when we used dreamer power, but that’s because we were putting events right. They had already happened, and Seers warned us about maintaining the timeline. Think about what happens if you use this ward and change Elizabeth’s destiny in the past.”

ROBERT ZIEFEL

I thought a moment. "I guess she would retain her powers... oh, and never need me to go back in time to do what I'm about to do. I see where you're coming from."

"We could work around that," said Yasui, not to be outdone. "Have Dean drop a note to Elizabeth and to himself, telling them what to do. To come back here as soon as they can and finish this guy off in the way we're about to."

"And thus, closing the loop. Yasui, that's great! That could work!"

"Do you really think so?" asked Elizabeth.

"If I get behind him, and scoop him up before he can speak that curse, yeah. I'll have to practice it a few times before I leave, but I think so."

And so I practiced. I had the contain ward in my left hand, the Cut ward in my right. Lucien would stick me with the time travel ward, and I would appear behind the progenitor. I would slap cut on his neck, putting energy in and hopefully chopping it off. Then the contain ward in my left hand would be used. As the head got sucked in I would draw the letter out of my pocket with my right and chuck it on the floor. Then I would grab the time travel ward off, and be returned to my own time.

The moment came, and Lucien slapped the ward on me.

Clashing Worlds

You only go 'round one time

Ah, summer vacation! A time to relax, and to reflect upon the events of the previous school year. That is, unless your name is Dean Chesterfield, like me. In that case, you seek no reprieve from your self appointed mission to become the greatest talisman maker ever. That, and help people. It is helping someone where this chapter of my life began.

I was hardly back home a day, putting some things away from my talisman bag, when I heard the doorbell. Our house, located on the eastern edge of town, was situated in the very center of the supernatural world: Demongate Island. Smack in the middle of the ocean, the island was home to people with every sort of power imaginable. In fact, it was the only place on Earth you can regularly see people using powers. People flew, teleported, or were carried from place to place as their powers allowed, and no one looked twice. It was a paradise for a person like me, that could learn the basics of any power. I would be the first to admit, however, that it was also somewhat lonely. All my friends lived elsewhere in the world, and even though I was getting to know my parents again after rescuing them, we still weren't what you would consider a normal family.

My parents were both in the "lab," or basement as most people would call it, when the doorbell rang. The basement was part mad scientist "hackerspace," and part ancient alchemist laboratory. Both my father and mother specialized in making things, so they needed a lot of materials, space, and quiet to concentrate. They mainly created the items requested by the Foundation for use on missions, but the occasional individual request came in, keeping them busy. So on one table you might see Bunsen burners

merrily flaming away, heating up a strange, swirling liquid while at a nearby table, spirit energy hung eerily in the air, waiting to be placed into an item.

As I knew my parents were probably both hard at work, and would rather not be disturbed, I quickly descended the stairs to reach the door before they rang again. I didn't really have any expectation, opening the door, as to whom it might be. My parents were called upon daily by various people, both for status reports or to pick up items. Yes, status reports could be done over the phone, but a lot of people with powers seemed to have somewhat of a blind spot where technology was concerned. Not that they were backwards, or didn't have access to it. No, quite often someone would teleport in only to later exclaim, "I totally forgot about my cell phone, I could have just called you!"

So someone coming by sometimes happened two or three times a day. It seemed most people had heard of my heroic rescue of my parents and were more than happy to linger a moment and discuss little tricks they had picked up in using their powers. As I couldn't attain the level of skill most people took for granted without years of effort, I focused on being efficient and sneaky with what I could do.

It was somewhat of a surprise then, when I opened the door to see the principal of the school, Lucien DeLefeu, and a very young looking girl looking back at me. The principal I knew well, as in the last two years of schooling I had come to him many times for advice on talismans and wards, that being my chief focus and what I was best at. He was in his mid fifties, with thinning grey hair. He was leaning on his cane, which...

"It's really you!" blurted the girl, eyes wide as she stared at me. "The boy that saved me! I can finally thank you!"

She pushed past Lucien and grabbed me up in a hug.

A bit panicked, I looked over at Lucien who seemed to be trying not to laugh. "Uh, do I know you?" I asked.

"Of course, silly!" said the girl, letting me go. "You saved me from that awful progenitor. Don't tell me you don't remember? It was, like, a couple of days ago!" She laughed. "You're just messing with me, aren't you? Oh, it's so good to finally be able to say thank you. So; thank you!"

She started hugging me again.

"Uh, you're welcome?"

Lucien cleared his throat. "Perhaps this might clear up a few things for you," he said, putting a folded up piece of paper into my hand.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Wait, you got a letter too? Why would you need to send yourself a letter? You’re weird!” she laughed again.

“You’re not the first person to say that,” I said, unfolding the paper. I started to read.

Dear Alternate Dean,

You might be a bit confused at the moment, due to the sudden appearance of Elizabeth here. Yes, that’s her name. She can tell you the whole story, which I suggest you believe and act on. Basically, you’re going to need to go to a certain cave, take a ward from the principal, and save two people from being cursed, in the past. The boy Matt was going to have his luck turn against him, and Elizabeth’s sundered spirit would have actually ripped away from her soul and started running around. Yeah, I know, it can do that? You can probably watch how we solved it last time with the Time Frame, as it’s already happened in your reality. I just wrote you this note so you know the whole thing is legit and will go with them. If it worked, this letter reached you so do like the Fraggles and pass it on. Better use a new sheet of paper though, you know why.

Things are getting stranger. Remember to ask about the cane.

The password is Draymock Tomarimas.

Good luck.

“The letter checks out,” I said. As naturally I had thought of a password once I learned time travel was possible, just in case I ever ran into it again. Never thought I would actually be using it, though! “Please, why don’t you both come in and you can tell me what I have to do.”

So the energetic girl, who I sensed had a ton of spirit energy, (probably why she had trouble sitting still), and Lucien came in and sat down.

“Where did you go, anyway?” asked Elizabeth. “You just showed up out of nowhere, saved us, and disappeared again. How did you even know to be there? It was *so cool*.”

“Finally, someone who appreciates a timely rescue.” I grinned. “Apparently, according to this, I went back in time to save you. From now, or at least a little while in the future. So I probably popped in from the future and then returned there.”

“You can do that?”

“I don’t know. I can do that?” I asked Lucien.

“There is a way, yes. How exactly do you know the letter ‘checks out’ as you put it? I was pretty skeptical when Elizabeth showed me the letter with what I had to do. But I figured I would come see you about it in any case.”

I showed him the password.

“You have a time travel password?”

“Doesn’t everybody?”

“I’m thinking of one right one,” said Elizabeth.

“Right,” he said slowly. “Anyway, I guess we’re off to this cave the note mentions, with Yasui and the Time Frame. I’m having a Foundation ESPer bring her along, so she should be here shortly.”

In the meantime, I had Elizabeth explain about how she came to be fighting a progenitor and such, and what Mr DeLefeu’s cane meant. Then Yasui arrived and I went with them to the cave.

“There you are,” said Yasui, watching me appear behind the progenitor that Elizabeth and Matt were about to fight.

We watched what “I” did.

“Odd that when I pop in from the future, Matt and you don’t react until after I’ve cut this guy’s head off. You think they would at least look at me.”

“Probably an ignore ward,” said Lucien. “My note said you knew that one?”

“I do know that one! Seems I thought of everything. Which, of course, is only natural.” I said this last very modestly, and I could tell everyone believed me.

I watched the events carefully, and then practiced them a few times, until I got them down.

“Nothing like watching yourself succeed in the past to give you that little boost of confidence,” Yasui remarked.

“I know. For just one tiny fraction of a second I thought about doing something differently than I just watched, just to see what would happen.”

“Don’t mess around with time travel,” cautioned Lucien.

“Not to worry, I said it was only a passing fancy. Okay, do I have everything?”

They looked me over, comparing how I looked in the frame to how I looked at the moment.

“Looks good. I’ll slap the ignore ward on, then the one for Time Travel. Good luck.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

I hooked into my dragon talisman so I could drain it of energy while in the past. I shoved it back into my pocket, made sure I had everything close at hand, nodded, and was off.

I appeared behind the progenitor, just as the slightly younger Elizabeth, Matt in tow, walked up to him.

Only have seconds, I thought to myself, feeling my energy draining away. As the progenitor started asking Elizabeth “Do you *really* want to do this?” I slapped the Cut ward onto his neck, spending extra energy to activate it and make a clean cut.

“What?” croaked the progenitor. Elizabeth and Matt did a double take as the ignore ward burned away and I became “visible” again. Wasting no time I slapped the contain ward on the head as it was intoning “Whoever just killed me, you shall suffer-” cutting it off.

Well, I had already cut it off, I mean cutting his speech- you know what I mean.

It vanished.

Gripping the now used contain ward tightly I drew the package with the freshly printed pages out from under my arm, and gave it a toss. With a final two fingered salute to the astonished kids, I ripped the time travel ward off and collapsed back in the future.

“Dean!” everyone shouted.

“Fine, I’m fine,” I assured them. “You weren’t kidding about the energy drain.”

“No, it’s pretty severe. But I figured your own energy, and the extra stuff you stash in the talisman, would be enough.”

“I can give you some!” said Elizabeth, bending down to touch me. “You did just save me, after all.” I felt energy flowing back into me.

“I can give you some,” mimicked Yasui softly. I glanced over at her and she gave me an innocent expression.

“That seems to have worked out well,” remarked Lucien.

“He really would have cursed me and made Elizabeth run away? And turned Matt's luck against him?”

“That’s what the note said,” answered Lucien.

“Then we’ve really dodged a bullet. The last time she got loose, well, I don’t like to even think about it. Thank you, Dean. If there’s ever *anything* I can do for you, just name it.” She hugged me again, and Yasui gave her a dark look.

“T’was but a trifle, my lady,” I said, Elizabeth helping me up. “I think I’m going to go home and have a nice nap.”

ROBERT ZIEFEL

Lucien chuckled. “You’ve earned it. I’ll see you in a few days for your summer classes.”

“See you when classes start,” said Elizabeth. “I’m super excited to go to an actual school and learn properly from now on. And Porta is just amazing, and I haven’t even seen it all. Zephyr really, really messed me up. This place, I can’t even tell you. I’ll be looking for you in school!”

Yasui came over and kissed me on the cheek. “See you soon, Dean. Good job saving... her.” She threw Elizabeth a ‘see, he’s mine’ look but she was ignoring it, asking Lucien if she couldn’t take some summer classes too, or at least tour the island a little more.

I really hope this isn’t going to be a problem.

What I did on my summer vacation

A people trap, set by a mouse.

I knew something was up that Friday when I came down to breakfast. My parents were both at the table, and my mother, Barbara, put something down in her lap when I came in the room.

“Good morning, Dean,” my father, Edmond, said cheerfully. “Just the weekend until your summer classes begin. Have anything in mind you’d like to do?”

I looked back and forth between them, and Barbara was obviously trying to hide a grin.

“Well,” I said, causally pulling a chair out to sit down, “thought I might track down some of those progenitors that Elizabeth was talking about, if they even still exist now? I wasn’t too clear on that, what with the whole oddness of the world now. Did normal people notice any of these odd changes Mr DeLefeu was talking about? I’ll have to look into that. Then I thought I might look into colleges, it’s never too early to start that, right? Are there colleges run by the Foundation? I do *not* want to give up using my many and varied powers just to get a college education. Do I even need a college education? I mean I still have two years left of school and every artificer teacher there says I’ve surpassed them, so I guess that’s going to be my job? But it might be nice to get out and see the world a little, not that my field trips don’t do that but it’s always with a group and I might like to spread my wings. Figurative wings, I haven’t figured out any shape-shift powers but I bet there’s a spirit that would give me that ability if I really wanted it. Have to look into that as well, maybe early afternoon? Plus I wanted to start learning Japanese, no reason really, I mean, how hard could it be? They only have like three alphabets, I could probably pick them up a few hours.”

“Is that all?” Edmond said with a smirk.

“That’s all for *Saturday*,” I clarified. “Now for Sunday I might sleep in an hour-”

“Okay, okay, who told you?” Barbara demanded, looking pointedly at Edmond.

He held up his hands. “I didn’t say a word.” He glared back at me. “Did you pick up mind reading and didn’t tell us?”

“No. What is this all about?”

“We have a surprise for you!” said Barbara excitedly. “Here!”

She handed me a plastic card, which I first took to be a credit card. It looked like a credit card, it had a magnetic stripe on the back and everything. But when I turned it over again I realized it didn’t have any numbers on it. On the bottom it said “Walt Disney World.” I looked back up at my parents.

“I don’t-”

“It’s what they use in place of paper tickets now,” Edmond explained. “That’s how it was explained to me, anyway.”

“This is a ticket...” I said slowly. “So we’re-”

“Going to Disney World for the weekend!” Barbara said, a big smile on her face.

“Wow. Really? That’s... such a normal, family thing to do. Seriously?”

“Yeah!” Barbara confirmed.

“You do want to go, right?” Edmond asked.

“Yeah, sure! Who wouldn’t? Isn’t it going to be super crowded in the summer though?”

“That’s the best part,” Barbara said, leaning forward. “The Foundation has bought the park out Saturday night at 6:00. We’ll be the only ones there.”

“What, just us?” I was flabbergasted. *It’s good to be a gangster!*

Edmond laughed. “No, no, your mother means people with powers. Of course we can’t go around just using them, most of the park staff is made up of normal people. But the, uh, creepier looking cambions and breath stealers and such can have a night of not worrying too much if their normalize wards fall off.”

“Most of the staff?”

“It’s one of the happiest places on Earth,” said Barbara seriously. “You don’t think the Foundation would leave it totally unguarded, do you? Demons would love to wreck the place up!”

“Do the people that run the park know this, or- oh, I suppose whoever is in charge could have powers.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I’m not sure, but it’s worked out so far. Walt himself was a seer, you know,” said Edmond.

“No!”

“True story. How do you think he came up with the place? Visions of the future.”

“That explains a lot.”

“So are you excited?” asked Barbara.

“Sure. I was just going to hang around the island and kill time until classes started. This is way better.” My parents seemed relieved. “What, you didn’t think I would?”

“You aren’t exactly a normal kid, Dean. And to tell the truth we’re not really a normal family yet, either. We’ve made some progress, yes, but you know. We weren’t sure if you would want to do a normal kid thing.”

“What, just because I made sure the present happened by traveling into the past with a sliver of the All-Father’s power channeled through a sleeping girl, that means I don’t want to see Disney World sometime?”

“I suppose we shouldn’t have worried.”

I looked back at the card in my hand. “So did the Foundation pay for the tickets or did you? I mean, can I talk to my friends about this?”

“Why wouldn’t you want to tell them about it?”

I considered. “Well, if I went and they didn’t, they might be jealous. And that might cause friction between us and I don’t want that. But if they were coming too, it would be fine because we were all going.”

“Ah,” said Edmond, a finger in the air. “But if they didn’t go, and they found out later that *you* went, wouldn’t they be mad you didn’t tell them?”

“Would they?” I asked, panicked. “I can’t win, can I?”

Barbara just gave me a funny look and shook her head as if to clear it. “Yes, your friends are going too, the Foundation is taking care of the whole thing.”

“Oh, that’s a relief. Well, looks like I have my work cut out for me. Better eat and get to it.” My parents looked at each other and then back at me quizzically. “Route optimization. Picking out ‘must see’ vs ‘nice to see’ on a scale of one to ten. Reading reviews of the rides, working out where to eat in the park, this stuff just doesn’t figure itself out, you know!”

“He’s your son,” both my parents said to each other, and fell to laughing.

I suppose being primarily an alchemist and an artificer, both would find an attention to detail important. But Edmond was forced into it... ah, never mind.

At about 2 AM a plane came to pick up those who were going to Florida that day, and headed southwest. I slept for part of the trip, but woke up when breakfast was being served. I talked to various people I knew from the island, as after all we had so few people there everyone knew everyone else. The general feeling was very upbeat, and both the kids and the adults seemed pretty excited. We landed at the Orlando International Airport where a bus came to take us to the park, which would be opening just about as we arrived. Those with inhuman features were already wearing their wards, so to normal eyes we looked like just another tour group.

“We won’t be acting like a tour group, though,” said Edmond. “We’ll just go our separate ways and blend in with the normal crowds. We’ll get a wristband that marks us as being allowed in the park after 6:00 though. I think we can pick them up about 4:00.”

“And it won’t make people mad, being thrown out like this?”

“Maybe, but it happens, so it won’t draw that much comment.”

And what crowds there were! I watched in amazement and a little nervousness as available space became packed with people as we walked down main street towards the castle. We had chosen to meet up with my friends at the statue of Walt Disney in front of the park, but I now realized what a mistake this was. This place was packed, and this was only the beginning!

The statue wasn’t going to work, I heard in my head. We moved over by the teacup ride, as there aren’t many people over here yet. Take the right nearest the castle into Fantasyland and meet us there.

“Change of plans,” I half shouted to my parents over the noise of the crowd. “Kat and the others are going to meet us in Fantasyland, where there aren’t so many people to fight through.”

“There is such a thing as... what is it called? Texting?” Barbara asked.

“What can I say, we like to make her feel useful.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

And so our day in the park began. We met up with Yasui, Osman and Christina, and met their parents as well. Deciding it probably wasn’t feasible to try and keep that many people together in the crowd, and agreed to get together for lunch and meet up at 6:00 when the park thinned out. We all said goodbye and headed to see what we could see before the massive wall of people slowed lines to a crawl.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Which happened about as soon as you might expect.

More than once I considered finding a quiet place to pop on an ignore ward and turn on my phase talisman. Then I could just walk through the walls and see the rides at my own pace. But part of the experience was waiting in all the lines, so I stuck it out. I knew I only had until six and then I could pretty much ride whatever I wanted, with no waiting.

I did have to laugh though, as everything I came out of emptied into a gift shop to buy themed merchandise.

“They don’t miss an opportunity, do they?” I asked, walking into the forth gift shop today. This time with western themed items, as we had just seen the Country Bear Jamboree.

“They do not,” said Barbara, shaking her head in wonder.

“If you want anything, let us know,” said my father.

“You’ll buy it for me?” *All this stuff looks pretty expensive...*

“I’ll study it in detail so I can make you a replica when we get home.”

I laughed. “Well, at least if we did buy something, I could put it in my-” I patted my side where I usually tied my little pouch of pocket dimension.

It wasn’t there. I paled. “My pouch is gone,” I said, eyes wide with fear.

“With all your stuff in it? You don’t think you dropped it someplace in the park, did you?” asked Barbara.

I was trying to think, imagining the horrible things that might happen if I got separated from it for too long.

“I hope not. Oh, this is bad. I wish I knew more seer skills now, they might come in handy.” *Think, Dean, what do you know that could help you track it down? Maybe ESP if I got near enough to it, but that was about it. Were there skills to track down a lost item?* I couldn’t think.

“I’m sure a seer can track it down,” said Barbara. “It’s no big deal, Dean. It’s not like anyone could open it and find your stuff in there. And even if it was lost, you can just make another and access the same dimension, getting everything back.”

“No, you don’t get it. It’s *mine*.”

She looked at me curiously, then looked at Edmond. “Is he saying what I think he’s saying?”

“He is. Think Dean, did you tie it on this morning? No, it would have been last night, right?”

“Right. I... I don’t really remember. It was so early, and we were rushing around getting everything ready. I know a way we can check though. Let’s find a quiet spot.” I looked around. “Quiet being a relative term, anyway.”

We found a place to sit and I concentrated on sending. *Kat, if you can hear me, let me know. I’m in... no wait. You don’t need to come here. Just head to my house and look on the stand next to my bed. Tell me if my pouch is there.*

I hear you, she answered. I know what pouch you’re talking about. I can’t believe you would have forgotten it. Hang on, be right back.

“Kat is going to check it out. We should hear back in a minute or two. She can get there and back pretty fast.”

“If it is there, should we just leave it?” Barbara asked. “How long can it be away from you?”

“Honestly? I have no idea, I’ve never tested that property. Thinking back on it now, I probably should have. But I didn’t think I would ever be apart from it simply because I was stupid enough to forget it. The only time it’s ever been away from me was when I went to that weird library place in Germany to fetch one of the map pieces. It was returned to me almost immediately.”

“We wouldn’t have to leave it until we got back,” said Edmond. “We could get it after the crowd thins out at six. It’ll be easier to find a quiet spot then.”

I nodded. “Okay, that’s what we’ll do. If it turns out to be there!”

We waited a moment more, and I saw a ghostly hand come over my shoulder.

“Don’t call attention to me,” said Katrina, hiding behind me. “Your pouch is there on the nightstand. Do you need Osman to petition an ophan to go get it? I don’t know how to teleport yet, I’m afraid.”

“Thanks, but no, I think it’ll be fine for a few more hours. It would help my peace of mind if you could just look in on it every so often. Make sure there isn’t a tornado building to destroy the house and carry it here on the winds.”

She giggled. “You got it, Dean. See you later.”

And she was gone again.

“Crisis averted, I guess,” I said to my parents. “At least it isn’t lying in a ride somewhere. That would have been awkward.”

“To say the least. So, where to now?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

We enjoyed ourselves and got our wristbands at the proper time, then were able to ride two more things before the crowds started thinning out. We met up with my friends and my parents asked if I wanted to go with them instead for now.

“We did the whole family thing,” said Barbara, “so I’m satisfied. If you want to go with your friends and do things, that would be okay with me.”

The other parents agreed, and Yasui grabbed my hand and pulled me with her. “Come on, Dean, let’s go have some fun!” The others ran to catch up.

We were just walking into the third ride when there was an announcement which rang through the park.

“Will all people still in the park please report to the area directly in front of Cinderella’s Castle? I repeat, all students and their parents are to report to the area directly in front of Cinderella’s Castle immediately.”

We looked at each other.

“What do you think is going on?” asked Christina.

“I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” answered Osman. “The castle is that way, we better get going.”

On the way, we saw a headless Micky struggling to rise in his bulky costume. It was a guy, probably a few years older than me, with brown hair. His Mickey head sat nearby. We rushed over to help him.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Man, you would not believe me,” he replied, eyes darting about.

“Try us,” said Yasui. “Are you hurt?”

“No, just fell over when that... I just tripped. Yeah.”

Christina went over to pick the head up and looked it over.

“Take a look at this,” she said, turning it towards us. It appeared to have been torn by tiny claws.

“Did something attack you?” asked Osman.

He sighed. “I just tripped, like I said.”

We all glared at him.

“Tripped, huh?” said Christina, flapping the cloth where the ear had been nearly sliced off.

“Okay, okay, but you’ll never believe it. I just saw a gremlin!”

“What?” we all said, shocked. “Here?”

Oddly, popular culture had gotten what gremlins looked like dead on, making some wonder if their image hadn’t been leaked to the movie industry for the movie. They weren’t the fuzzy, lovable beings the movie portrayed them starting out as, but the green, scaly skinned mechanical

wreckers they became later on. Gremlins could take just about anything apart, and they did so with considerable gusto and amusement.

“Wait, what?” asked the kid. “Why would it being here be more surprising than it existing at all?”

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure how to answer that one. “Are you sure it was a gremlin?” I asked, trying to salvage the situation.

“Sure I’m sure. I saw that movie last year when my buddies had a retro movie night. You know, *The Matrix*, *Gremlins*, *ET*. Aw man, my boss is not gonna be happy about this,” he said, taking the head and looking at it. “What am I going to tell him?”

“Try the truth,” said Osman. “He may surprise you and believe it. You better get going, something is going on around here, and you should probably get under cover.”

He looked at us like we were from another planet, but shrugged. “Whatever you say. Have a magical stay!” The last was said with a bit of a sarcastic edge, and he put the head under his arm and headed off.

“We know what this is about now,” said Kat, appearing before us as Tinker Bell. “But who would be stupid enough to summon gremlins *here*?”

“Let’s go and find out,” said Christina, shaking out the cross she used as a focus to manifest her energy weapon. “Osman, keep an eye out. Gremlins might not be the only thing around.”

“Good point,” he said, looking around and flexing his right hand. “This area looks clear though. Come on.”

We made our way to near the entrance to the park, where there was a large crowd already milling about. There was a sort of stage in front of the castle where three chastised looking boys were sitting, under the baleful glare of several teachers. A few minutes went by, they seemed to be taking a count of everyone. They seemed satisfied, and Mr Stilling grabbed a microphone.

“This area has been warded off, we can talk freely here,” he began. “You’re wondering why we’ve gotten you back here.” He paused.

“Gremlins,” shouted Christina.

“What? Gremlins? Who said that?” asked Mr Stilling, looking over the crowd. “Did you actually see them? Come up here!”

She started forward, and we followed.

“Anyway, yes, thanks to these... idiots... there are a handful of gremlins loose in the park. Your job is to find them, and take care of them. Also report any damage they’ve done so it can be repaired. We need to leave the

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

park in the same condition we got it in, so get moving. We don't have a lot of time before the park closes and I know you would rather spend it having fun than cleaning up the mess caused by these three!"

He glared back at them, and they withered further.

Someone I couldn't hear shouted something up at Mr Stilling.

"Good question," he replied. "I'll repeat it. He wants to know why they are still here. Answer- we have no idea. If you can figure that out, maybe capture one of the creatures, great. But that's secondary, we can figure that out later. Shoot first, they need to be taken out! I want you at least in pairs, one seer or *ESPer*, one fighter. Those that can petition, summon trackers or other angels with useful abilities, but nothing too large. We'll do damage control on anyone not a part of the Foundation later, but let's not push it. Better to wipe one person's memory than let a gremlin demolish a section of park. Anything else? Oh yeah, summoners, *do not* summon *anything*. Until we figure out what's keeping these gremlins here, let's not make our situation worse. Check in every half hour so we can keep a count of those that are taken care of and get you back to the fun stuff. Got that? Get going!"

The crowd started to disperse, and we got up to the stage.

"Ah, Dean and company, why am I not surprised. Did you take one out already?"

I hung my head in shame. "Sorry, we just helped a mascot that was attacked," I answered.

"Someone was attacked? This just keeps getting better! But it was a gremlin, not something else? Are you sure?"

"The guy said it was, and that's one of the few creatures a normal person would be able to recognize."

"True. All right. Get going."

We all nodded and moved off.

"Should we stick together?" I asked. "Osman and Kat both fit the bill for tracking stuff down, but if Kat separates it'll be harder for her to sense anything."

"Let's head back to the place we saw Micky get attacked," said Osman. "We're going to have to use our heads for this one, and not just run about randomly."

"You have a plan?" Yasui asked.

"I certainly do."

Back at the spot, Osman started praying and a moment later, a koma-inu appeared and looked around. I had seen Osman petition two of these before, that time Yasui ran off to beat up the summoner who had killed the horse last year. It was big, and sort of looked like a cross between a lion and a dog.

Osman bowed respectfully. “Koma-inu,” he began. “We need your help. A gremlin attacked someone here and we were hoping your nose might be able to sniff him out.”

The koma-inu nodded, and started sniffing around. He indicated that he had picked up a scent, and motioned for us to follow. We did.

“Not many know they have such a fantastic sense of smell,” he explained as the angelic being followed the trail. “Most just call them for their combat abilities, so I’m sure it’ll be a nice change for this one to do some tracking.”

It led us into a ride, the front of which was all torn up.

“Yeah, it came this way all right,” remarked Yasui, shaking her head. The koma-inu started going inside.

“Wait a moment, honored... companion,” I said. “Let’s just check the exit first, see if the creature is still inside or not.”

The koma-inu nodded, and looked around for where it might be. We found it, and he picked up the trail again. He sat down and clapped his paws together a few times, then bounded off again.

“I think he was impressed by your foresight,” Osman explained.

“It was only logical.”

We tracked the scent to a second ride, and then a third, and it seemed to not emerge from this one.

“Great,” said Christina. “Yasui, you and Osman cover the entrance in case it gets out that way. Dean, you’re with me.”

“You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?” I asked her.

“Maybe.”

The koma-inu cocked his head.

“You’re with us too, big guy. Lead us in.”

“Remember,” I cautioned. “Let Kat try to grab it with *TK* if she can. I want answers as to how these things stuck around.”

“Yes, keeping a creature here without the energy cost is of interest to me too,” said Osman, who had a pretty low energy.

“Shoot, that’s right! Are you going to be okay?”

“I tried the extend calling technique, but it failed. I should still be able to keep him around an hour before it becomes an issue.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Okay. Christina or I can recharge you if need be. Let us know when you’re starting to get drained.”

He nodded and headed back to the entrance.

We went in through the “gift shop” exit, and skirted the track where empty, unmoving cars sat. Christina manifested her bow and crouched low as she moved forward.

“Looking around the rides like this could be fun,” remarked Christina. “Too bad we don’t have time for it.”

“But then all the magic will be gone,” I replied. “The rides work because you are pointed in the direction they want you to look. Having access like this, seeing everything, sort of spoils it. I thought about doing that myself earlier, with ignore and phase, but decided against it.”

“I guess. I figured you would be the first to want to know how they did it.”

“Oh, I looked that sort of thing up before we even left.”

She just shook her head as the koma-inu looked back at us and put a claw up to its lips for us to be quiet.

“Sorry,” I whispered to it. I was of course terrible at it, but I tried using *ESP* to get a sense of where the gremlin might be. I could have used spirit sense which I was better at, but there were three relatively large sources of energy concentrated here, so I figured it wasn’t worth trying. I didn’t need to use the skill actively to know the koma-inu had about as much as I did, and I knew from experience that Christina had almost that much in her ‘unpowered’ state. We crept forward, my attempt with *ESP* failing miserably.

But we did hear something being taken apart, and a high pitched voice gleefully laughing. The koma-inu stopped and pointed, and we looked up. There was the gremlin, gleefully ripping apart what looked like a projector. This was one of the newer rides, the Buzz Lightyear Space Ranger Spin, which relied on both projected images and physical objects.

Naturally it would be drawn towards a newer ride, they would be more interesting to dismantle.

Christina drew back an arrow.

“Shoot to wound,” I whispered to her. “We want him alive!”

“I know what I’m doing,” she whispered back, and let the arrow fly. The projector smashed apart, and the gremlin gave a squeak.

“Oh crap,” we heard it say, jumping down from the niche. “I’m out of here!”

“After it!” shouted Christina, “don’t let it get away!” Another arrow blazed after it, just missing it.

It ran back towards the entrance with us hot on its heels, and as it got close it saw Osman and Yasui standing there. It tried to stop and looked frantically around for another way out, but got yanked off its feet with a yell.

“That seemed to work,” said Christina smugly.

“You missed on purpose!” I exclaimed, walking over to the thing which was now struggling in mid air. “Nice job, by the way, Kat. You did good too.” *I did wonder, I knew she was a great shot.*

“Of course,” Christina said. “If I wanted it dead I would have put an arrow through its head and been done with it. Now, we want some answers.”

“Won’t tell you anything!” said the gremlin. “Let me go. That was a dirty trick you played. Unfair! I’m telling my union rep!”

“You don’t have to tell us anything,” I said, making a spinning motion with my hand. The gremlin spun about. On its chest was a small piece of paper with some symbols on it.

“That’s what’s keeping you here, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Won’t tell you!”

“It seems to me you have two choices,” I said, pointing to it. “We rip this off and you go home. Or, my archer friend here puts an arrow through you and you go home the *long way* in agony. What’s it going to be?”

“Okay, okay, I’ll talk!”

“I thought you might. What’s with the ward?”

“My boss gave it to me. Gave everyone one. Said if we found ourselves someplace good, we could use it and stick around. Cause more damage, you know?”

“I see. Who made it?”

“How should I know?”

“Good point. Okay, we’re bringing you to a teacher, I’ll bet they’ll like a look at it, see if they don’t recognize the style.”

“You said you would send me back if I talked!”

“And I will, don’t worry. We’re just taking a little walk first, that’s all.” I turned to the koma-inu. “Thank you for your help, we wouldn’t have tracked him nearly this easily without you.”

He nodded his head.

“Do you mind sticking around? We’ll bring this one in and if there are still more to look for, we’ll need your help again.”

He indicated he didn’t mind, and we set off. The teachers perked up as we got close, the gremlin floating along shouting at us.

“Thought you might like to see this, just in case this was the only one that was captured,” I said, pointing to the ward.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“We had one other here already, you’re slipping Dean,” said Mrs Chadwick playfully. “But I’ll take a look, see if it’s the same maker.”

She looked it over and said it was, but she didn’t recognize the “signature” of the maker. She took a photograph of it though.

“Too bad,” Osman remarked. “But I guess the summoners aren’t to be fully blamed.”

“Oh, they’re in a lot of trouble right now in any case, don’t you worry about that. They wanted to dismantle It’s a Small World as a joke, can you believe it? Their excuse was they didn’t expect the gremlins to just take off immediately like they did. Honestly!”

“What will happen to them?”

“We’ll think of something creative. Anyway, let’s add this little guy to the tally and you can go out again.”

“Don’t want to go back! Don’t want to go back!” the gremlin was shouting.

“Oh, be quiet,” said Mrs Chadwick, ripping the ward off. It burned away and the gremlin vanished.

“One more down, four more to go.”

“We’ll get back to it then. See you in twenty minutes or so for the check in.”

“Right. Nice work, all of you. It was a team effort, right?”

We all nodded, and she smiled.

We also reported the two and a half rides he had gotten through and demolished, and she rolled her eyes.

“These guys work fast. I’ll add them to the list. We’re in for a long night. Your father is helping with the repairs, he’s not a half bad alchemist.”

“Thanks,” I said, feeling a little pride.

In the end, that was the only one we saw, but we walked around and noted other things that looked damaged. We checked in twice, and the second time we were told they were all accounted for. About a third of the attractions were damaged, so more Foundation people were arriving to help with repairs. This meant a lot of the park was shut down. We still had fun walking around and looking at things, and finally made our way to the hotel to get some sleep for our next, and last day in Florida.

Uneventful Summer

Enthusiasm, when tempered, can be a positive trait.

After we boarded the plane Sunday night to go back to the island, I asked my parents if they had heard anything about a situation similar to the one we all went through.

“Which do you mean?” asked Barbara. “Demons trashing a place or some stupid boys thinking they’ll have a laugh and it blows up in their face?”

“Hey!” said Edmond. “I resemble that remark!”

“You aren’t that stupid,” I said jovially. I paused. “Are you? I mean I’d like to know if I’ve inherited some kind of brain... rot... genetic thing.”

“Me cave man! Uggga Uggga!”

Barbara hit his shoulder. “No, he’s not. But he’s done his share of stupid things while growing up.”

“Oh?” My eyes lit up. “Do tell!”

“Getting back to your question, Dean.”

“Yes. Actually neither of those things. I meant demons actually planning ahead and using wards once summoned.”

Barbara shook her head. “Not that I’ve ever heard. It’s a dangerous precedent if demons are starting to think about ways they can combine powers. Usually they’re bad enough just on their own.”

“You don’t think other artificers were kidnapped and forced to make wards like you were, do you, mom?”

“Who can say,” she answered. “I suppose it’s possible, and those wards they used came from somewhere. There are demon artificers of course, and the demon world has certainly had the time to crank out millions of the things.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“But why now? Why tip your hand?”

“Trail run, maybe?” asked Edmond.

“In that case it was an unqualified success,” complained my mother. “We were lucky to get the park back together in time.”

“What was that circle you were using?” asked Dean.

“Circle of repair. Anything within the circle gets repaired when it gets activated. Want me to teach it to you?”

“I should start learning a few. I don’t actually know anything about making them. With my focus these past years on talismans and my more recent focus on wards I never even gave them a thought. But I suppose I should learn about my native powers before moving on to learning snippets of other kinds.”

“There are some handy ones, we can go over them sometime.”

“Thanks.”

“I guess we’ll have to hope only the demon lord of the gremlins thought of it, and didn’t share the idea with anyone,” said Edmond. “Not that I’m worried about demons that are summoned sticking around, just rip the ward off or kill them. That was a weird situation that probably won’t come up again. I’m more worried about them getting wards to make them immune to holy power or worse.”

“Nothing we can do about it though,” said Barbara.

“Yeah, I know. But if they decide to get smart and start using our own powers against us, in addition to what they can already do...” He shook his head.

“Good thing the new generation of defenders is growing up more powerful than ever!” I boasted.

They both just nodded and went back to looking out the window.

That summer I was quite busy, but not in the way I expected. After trying things and talking to people and looking up stuff in the library I discovered I was about at my limit for learning skills from power types my soul wasn’t attuned to. Anything more advanced than I knew at the moment depended on learning certain other things, like the ESPer attack skill of cohesion depending on knowing barrier and telekinesis really well. There were other skills, like the holy chosen ability to channel holy power, but I was very hesitant to learn how to draw upon that sort of thing. The Heavens might take exception to someone they hadn’t specifically chosen to do that, and come for a little chat. With swords or whatever. So leave the holy power to the holy people, that was my motto.

This sort of got me down, but I stuck around the school to help out, mostly helping the other artificers that were taking summer classes get better at talisman and ward making. I did manage to pick up a circle and a ward, and made a bunch of the wards. They both were to help Osman, the circle being a “circle of petitioning” which would help him to petition the Heavens more quickly. The other was our good friend bind that the gremlins had used against us. Now that I was not so disgusted with wards I found myself more interested in them, and figured I could make a bunch of them over the summer on thin sheets of plastic so they were more tear resistant. He could then carry them around without worry and slap one on anything he brought here to avoid the constant energy drain. I figured he would be pretty excited.

As far as the circle went, I admit I cheated a little bit. Circles, once put onto a surface, tended to degrade rather rapidly. After all, it wasn't the ink but the effort the artificer was putting in that gave marks on paper, be they large or small, their effectiveness. Now why a ward could last forever but a circle only a few hours I didn't get a satisfactory answer to when I asked around. The best theory was that the ward was more concentrated, being smaller. I argued that making wards tiny was for the comfort and convenience of the person carrying them around- I could make one take up the side of a building with spray paint if I wanted to.

People just got a disgusted look after that and went away muttering and shaking their heads.

In any case, circles could be made permanent if you were willing to work on them longer. Given I had all summer, I worked a whole week on putting one down on canvas, activating it after charging a bunch of energy into it with my dragon talisman. (This was the cheating part, most artificers couldn't do that!) I couldn't help but smile as I watched it light up, and my teacher said I had done an excellent job on it. I couldn't wait for Osman to try it! Naturally it got shoved into my talisman pouch, so I could pull it out at any moment and get him standing on it, saving myself ten tedious minutes of trying to draw the thing out in the field.

All too soon, or in reality not soon enough for my tastes, people started arriving on the island again because classes were about to start up. I excitedly greeted my friends as they stepped off the plane, and was unsurprised to see Elizabeth running towards us, hair streaming behind her. It seemed the incoming class of new students was larger than ever, so it seemed the surviving members of Bay Trail decided to come here as well.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Dean!” she said excitedly, “you’re here! I really get to attend classes at Demongate! This is so amazing!”

“There was some doubt?” I teased her.

“After all I had been through, I didn’t know what to believe anymore. I am so excited to actually start being trained properly. My mom even took the news pretty well, and my little sister is soooo jealous!”

“It’s still a lot of math and health class and history and all that,” cautioned Osman. “Not just power stuff.”

“That’s dumb. We need to learn how to defend against things trying to kill us, or brainwash us, or whatever. Not about who won the battle of the bulge or whatever.”

“You mean the German thing? Because the obesity epidemic is still going strong,” said Christina. “We aren’t winning that one.” We all stared at her. “What?”

“Christina is making jokes now?” asked Yasui. She shook her head. “Come on Dean, you need to tell me all about your summer!”

“What, all those emails I sent you weren’t enough?”

“Oh, I was hoping he could show me around,” pouted Elizabeth.

“Come on,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I think we can do both at the same time.”

As we walked we talked about what we had all worked on during the summer, and I noticed everyone had worked really hard for some reason.

“Uh, yeah?” said Christina. “We were visited in our dream by a dying dreamer and told that things were going to get worse really soon? You might recall this?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” I protested. “I think it’s great. Osman learned some new petitioning rituals from Kat, who has the knowledge of her angel, and improved some of his other skills. You worked on your marksmanship, while Yasui worked on her martial arts. Kat learned a better attack, cohesion, to more effectively protect Osman and I picked up a few things as well. If we aren’t ready for whatever comes, I don’t know any group of people who would be.”

“As long as you haven’t forgotten,” she grumbled.

“I don’t think any of us have forgotten,” said Yasui.

“Is there anything *I* can do to help?” asked Elizabeth.

“Sure,” I replied. “Study hard. Be ready for anything. You’ve been through a lot, but that may just be the warm up.”

“I will, Dean. I won’t forget what you did for me, and I’ll try to become the best shaman I can. I promise.”

Yasui made a vomiting sound.

“Excuse me,” I said, looking at her. “Remember my goal of becoming the best talisman maker ever? And I think you expressed some interest in getting better after fighting those guys trying to resurrect the scary progenitor? What’s so different about her saying the exact same thing?”

“Okay, okay. I hear you.” She paused. “Sorry.”

“Anyway, let’s get you all settled in, give Elizabeth the tour, and head up to the principal’s office.”

“Why, have we been bad already?” asked Osman.

“No!” I said, laughing. “We have a club to form.”

Later that day, the five of us stood in principal DeLefeu’s office.

“We have enough support,” I said, sweeping an arm out to indicate my three old friends and my one new one. “With your approval the Helping People Club will begin.”

“Oh, we’re really doing that?” asked Christina. “I still want to do archery club you know?”

“Your duties won’t be onerous,” I explained. “Just be available should we need your particular skills.”

She didn't consider for long. “Fine.”

“And it’s a club that exists just to help people? With powers?” asked Elizabeth. “Can we occasionally play badminton? I’m in for sure either way.”

“Me too!” said Yasui, a little too quickly.

Both Osman and Katrina agreed.

“You have enough people, I guess. Will you accept others if they want to join you?”

“Depends on our problem to solution ratio, I guess. I wouldn’t mind someone with holy powers, and by that I mean a holy chosen, no offense Osman, as they can do some unique things I can’t. But if we don’t have any problems to solve and people want to join... well, that could be a problem.”

“I guess we’ll have to see how it goes. Okay, I’ll assign you a space, what do you want your schedule to be?”

“I think, given the number of people we now have, how about an “office hour” after class individually, but say a group meeting once a week for two hours? I’m thinking Monday for that. Whatever doesn’t conflict with archery club, Christina.”

“Why so often? And what are we supposed to do for an hour?” she asked.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Homework, realistically. But you’ll really be there to collect the problems that come in and alert the rest of us the next day we have a case or cases. Of course more than one person can be there if they want to drop by and hang out.”

“Couldn’t we just have a box people drop pieces of paper into?”

“I thought about that, but no. A box could be broken into or read by seers. Confidentiality is but one of the many services we’ll offer. You come to the Helping People Club, and you speak to a representative who will keep quiet about why you came.” I turned to the principal. “Unless it’s something illegal of course! Then we’ll come to you immediately.”

“Of course,” he dryly replied.

“We’ll write up a whole charter at our first meeting. Charter? Is that the right word? The rules we’ll use. We can get some wards to block seer powers so we can assure people their issues will not leave the room. Whatever we have to do.”

“Fine.”

“As long as it comes down when you’re not talking to someone,” said Lucian. “Or doesn’t go up in the first place if they don’t insist on it.”

“Sure, whatever the procedure has to be,” I agreed.

“Then I guess it’s official,” he said, a gleam in his eyes.

“Excellent,” I said, turning to the others and smiling. “The Helping People Club is open for business.”

We agreed to meet the next day and make up our posters and charter so people knew we existed and would come to us for help. Christina got her archery club schedule and said Monday would be fine for the group meeting, and she could do Thursday for what she called the ‘useless hour of hanging around uselessly.’

As we made posters, Elizabeth, whose enthusiasm for school hadn’t waned, wanted to know more about where I got this whole idea from.

“The principal, last year, actually,” I explained. “Right after I helped this ESPer girl get her powers back. She hadn’t really tried to get them back after she lost them, and I think that was because she didn’t really have anyone to turn to. Oh, her friends tried to cheer her up I’m sure, and any teacher here would have offered advice. But she never really asked anyone. We later learned that was partially because of damage to her soul, making her more prone to dark thoughts. I just couldn’t help but think if something like this club had existed, it would have been different. Having someone her own age to talk to might have been less intimidating than needing to go to an adult.”

“But what if we get something we can’t handle?” asked Osman.

“I don’t know, we’ve got a pretty good selection of powers here,” I said, looking around. “You can call angels, which we would have to discuss of course, to make sure it was really necessary. I know your feelings in that area. I can make stuff, Kat can feel things out, Elizabeth can ask the help of spirits, and Yasui or Christina can beat things up. But in the spirit of your question, being more removed from the problem allows us certain advantages.”

“Right,” said Yasui. “We could take an embarrassing issue to a teacher because it isn’t happening to us. And if we don’t name names, it won’t get out that problem exists for that person.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “We just bring the solution back, or at least get the right people involved.”

“You really think people will go for this kind of thing?” asked Christina, pointing to the poster Elizabeth was currently shaking glitter onto. Naturally, Christina herself had refused to help make posters, and was simply watching and making the occasional snort and eye roll.

“If we get a reputation for success, I’m sure our clubroom will have a line stretching down the hall. Okay, that’s an exaggeration but yes, I do. Think of it this way- even if no one ever comes, at least we got to hang out, talk, do homework, study for tests together, the whole works. We fulfilled our “club requirement” and maybe someone will be desperate enough to come in. If I can help but *one* person, I’ll be satisfied.”

“Yeah,” agreed Elizabeth. “Despite my insistence that I wouldn’t learn the spirit energist attack skill, my powers have still mainly been about destroying stuff. Or killing people without me, that one time they got away from me. I really want to discover positive uses of my powers, I know there must be some.”

Yasui looked up, a sort of “we’re the same” look on her face, but quickly went back to working on the poster. I gave a small smile. We both grabbed for the glue, and Yasui jerked her hand back. She knocked into the glitter that was sitting there, which flew off the table. She went to grab for it, but it slipped through her fingers and went spinning end over end.

It landed with a thunk and bounced again. When it came down this time it stayed down, and Yasui was staring at the floor, eyes wide.

“Now how in the world did that happen?” she asked. “Did one of you do something?”

We all leaned over in our chairs to see what she was referring to, and the glitter that had spilled had formed into a perfect, thin circle, with the jar in the exact center.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

We all looked around, but everyone shook their heads.

I tried to grab it with TK but somehow it just bounced out of my mental grasp, Katrina said, her illusion form also bending over to look at the circle. Not that she saw that way, she was still seeing out of Osman's eyes, but as illusion was easier on him than sending, it's what she used most often when she needed to talk to us. She tended to try and be as realistic as possible, when she wasn't pretending to be a fairy or something, that is.

"That's a good question," I finally answered. "I suppose this is Demongate High, so who knows?"

"You mean this sort of thing often happens?" asked Elizabeth.

"Weird stuff? I guess. This exact thing? No. It seems almost impossible for that stuff to have spilled in that exact pattern."

I heard a click, and looked over to see Osman taking a picture of it with his cell phone.

"You don't see anything weird, energy wise, do you, Osman?" asked Christina. "With all the spirit energy in this room it's a little hard for me to tell."

He shook his head no. "Perfectly normal glitter as far as I can see."

"Weird!" exclaimed Yasui. "Guess I'll clean it up."

"Wait," said Katrina. "I can get it all with telekinesis easier than you doing it by hand." A piece of paper whisked itself off the table and swooped under the glitter, getting most of it. "There you go, now you can just lift the paper up!"

"Thanks," said Yasui, doing just that, and tipping the glitter into the bottle. It slid normally.

"Very bizarre," said Christina. "Wonder if there's some weird energy field the stuff got caught in?" She got up and started (presumably) sensing around. "I'll have to check once you're all gone. You can stay, Osman."

"Thanks," he grumbled, knowing his spiritual energy to be the lowest of the group.

"Not a problem."

Our First Case

*Have one mystery solved, get the
second one solved for half off*

The Helping People Club didn't have long to wait for our first case. Everyone was excitedly waiting the first day after classes to see if anyone would arrive. Christina kept shaking her head and muttering "It's never going to work."

After the fifth time she said that I leaned over to her. "And yet, you're still here."

"I'm just... I just want to be able to say I told you so once no one shows," she said hastily.

"Sure."

"Should we expect anyone on the first day?" asked Elizabeth.

"Kat seems excited, but she won't tell me why."

I looked puzzled. "Wait a second, is she saying we have futures now?"

"I always did, remember?" he asked. "It was you three the dreamer messed with who didn't."

"Oh, yeah," I said, slumping back down.

"What's this?" asked Elizabeth.

"Long story. Suffice to say someone went back in time and changed our destinies so we would meet in this time. In my case it seems there were a lot of changes. After that premonition never worked on us again."

Elizabeth stared questioningly at us.

"It's true," sighed Christina. "Much as I wish it wasn't. I met people in the demon world who knew me, but I didn't know them, because they were there when the changes took place."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“But if it was in the past—”

Christina held up her hands. “Hey, don’t look at me. Reality bending with dreamer power is way above my head. I for one am glad it’s gone!”

“Excuse me?”

We all turned to see a boy about our age peaking into the room.

“Please, come in!” I said excitedly. “Have a seat! Wait a second, I’ve seen you around the island haven’t I?”

He smiled. “I figured it was you when I saw the posters. There’s only one Dean that would start a crazy club like this.” He stepped into the room and looked us over. He was of course wearing the school uniform like everyone else, and looked to be of mixed ancestry. Darkish skin, a hint of Asian features, short dark hair. “It’s me, Nanda, from a couple of streets over.”

“Yeah, I remember now. I’ve seen you around town. Welcome! What can we do for you?”

“You really have a Helping People Club, it’s not a joke?” he asked, looking around the room.

“Unfortunately,” said Christina.

“Oh, just ignore her,” said Elizabeth. “Do you want to join or be helped?”

“I actually need some help,” he admitted, sitting down. “My parents are splitting up and I want to know why.”

“Did you think of, I don’t know, asking them?” asked Christina. “Problem solved, glad we could help.”

“Yes,” he said patiently. “And as far as I can tell, they’re both telling the truth. That’s what’s bothering me.”

Every eye in the place flicked to the pin on his armband, where the symbol for a seer was placed.

“You would know better than us, wouldn’t you?” asked Yasui.

“Normally, yes. But both of their stories are not lies. But one of them must be lying and using it as some kind of excuse. I have to get to the bottom of it before they split for good.”

“Maybe it is just an excuse,” said Elizabeth. “My parents split up years ago and my father moved to Buffalo. Maybe they just don’t want to be together anymore.”

“But they do, that’s the thing. If it wasn’t for this one thing, both say they would stay together.”

“Okay, you better start from the beginning,” I said.

He took a deep breath. “Right. This is my mother’s second marriage. She’s an ESPer and went to school here, obviously. She was from Indonesia and after she graduated, the Foundation found her a job in India, where she

met my father. They married and had me. But she didn't tell him she had powers, and when he found out he totally freaked out. Called her a witch, all the standard male crap you might think people would spout when they find out a 'mere woman' can tear them apart with her mind. Or read his thoughts. Or anything else ESPers can do."

"Which is a lot," Kat reminded everyone, appearing briefly in illusion form.

Nanda went on, probably not included in the illusion. "So he left her. Of course, in India the man gets nearly everything in a divorce, so she requested a new assignment from the Foundation. They set her up here, where she met my step father, who was from Uzbekistan. He's an inheritor. So, my step father goes on a Foundation mission, right? But my mother insists she saw him going into a hotel with another woman two days later. He insists that he didn't return until his mission was done, and came straight home."

"And both are telling the truth?" asked Elizabeth.

Nanda nodded. "As far as I can tell."

"Have you seen any tattoos on them that might make them immune to seer power?" I asked, thinking about the horse incident.

Nanda shook his head. "I had them each tell me a lie to make sure my power was still working on them. It was."

"What about some kind of spirit clone technique?" asked Yasui. "What's his inherited item do?"

"It's just a sword, nothing like that."

"That's an interesting point," I said, half to myself. "Would a person using the spirit clone technique to be with two girls at once technically be cheating?"

"Why do you want to know?" Yasui said, glaring between Elizabeth and myself with her arms crossed. She put on an innocent expression.

"Uh, just curious. I've never heard of a ward to do anything like that, though I suppose there could always be other weird powers in the world that could. Why come back here though, where there's the possibility of getting caught? I mean there's a seer and an ESPer in the family. He must have known he wouldn't get away with it."

"Which is why I think it's my mother that's lying about it somehow."

"We have some experience with someone fooling seer abilities, by not exactly answering the question or taking it too literally. Maybe you just need to ask it differently. Do you think your parents would mind if we came and asked them a few things?"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“My father wouldn’t. He wants to get to the bottom of this. I’m sure my mother would go along with it, just to prove it once and for all.”

“Then we’re heading back into town. I’ll go get permission from the principal, you guys meet me at the teleport room. Christina, I’m sure you are thrilled to go, would you rather wait here in case someone else shows up?”

“Yeah, fine, whatever.”

“If you display that level of enthusiasm to whoever shows, it’ll give them a great peace of mind.”

“I only have fifteen minutes to wait anyway.”

I looked over at the clock. “True. Come my companions, we have a mystery to solve.”

So I went to the principal to get permission to return to the village, which he gave me after hearing it was for a case. I went down to the “teleport room,” where there were various permanent circles of bridging etched into the floor. This had been made over the summer, as the principal liked my idea for a room like this the year before.

I handed my pass to the guard, and he looked it over. Of course “guard” was a loose term, it was just an upperclassman, earning some money by keeping an eye on the room and making sure no one snuck out through here. Circles into more sensitive areas on Earth I’m sure had many more protections on them. These just went to various Foundation controlled areas, where people with powers were close at hand.

“Village?” he asked.

“Indeed, my good man. We shall return before the sun descends the horizon, you have my word as a gentleman.”

“Is he always like this?” asked Elizabeth.

“Pretty much,” Yasui agreed.

“That circle there,” he said, pointing. He looked at my own pins. “I’m guessing you know how to activate it.”

“Fear not, I am familiar with the procedure. Thank you.”

He shrugged and went back to reading.

A few seconds later, we were walking towards Nanda’s house. Slightly later than that, he was introducing us to his family and explaining why we were all there.

“And you think you kids can get to the bottom of it?” asked Bahodir, his step father.

“We’ve solved greater mysteries than this,” I replied.

“Go ahead, let him dig his own grave,” said Nisrina, his mother.

“Very well. Mr Nabiyevev, where were you at the time in question, specifically, when your wife claims she saw you entering the hotel with another woman.”

“I was in Russia, helping two other men track down and destroy a demon that we discovered was living there.”

I glanced over at Nanda, and he nodded.

“And you left no duplicate of yourself here that might have been acting in your place?”

“Duplicate? No, of course not!”

He nodded again.

“So there is something going on here. You can’t both be lying.”

“Talk to him,” said Nisrina, pointing at her husband. “I know what I saw.”

“With respect, though, do you?” asked Osman. “How can you be sure it wasn’t an illusion? My sister uses them all the time, and it’s pretty convincing sometimes.”

“Who would want to do that?”

“A good question,” said Elizabeth. “Do you have any enemies, sir? Anyone who might want to break up your marriage?”

“Not any specific ones, I don’t think. I mean I’ve destroyed my share of demons if that’s what you mean?”

“And demons have been acting a little weird lately,” I said, giving my friends a knowing look. They nodded. “So it could have been someone shape-shifted to look like you, or even as simple as an imitate ward.”

“So I should just believe him?” asked Nasrina.

“He’s your husband, of course you should believe him,” said Nanda, exasperated. “You believe me when I say he’s telling the truth, don’t you?”

“I... well... yes of course, I do, but-”

“But nothing! Like Dean says, there are tons of powers out there that could make you think you were seeing him when you weren’t.”

“Like a bakeneko!” said Elizabeth. “They can become just about anyone.”

“Yeah, Albert was telling me about some trouble they had with one of them. At least consider the possibilities while we look into it.”

“I guess I’ll have to.”

“Thank you,” said Bahodir. “What did you have in mind, young man?” he asked me.

“First we need to determine if there really was a person there, or if it was just an illusion. Or memory alteration, a power that made you think

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

you remembered seeing him, when you really didn't. You remember the time you saw this fake husband of yours going into the hotel?"

"How could I forget it?"

"Great. Yasui, I hope you brought it."

"Of course, I knew we might need it. Lead on!"

All three looked confused.

"Don't worry, you'll understand soon. Come on, show us where."

As we walked, Nanda asked his mother why she didn't immediately confront her husband when she saw him.

"I guess I was just too shocked. I kept thinking I was wrong, or that I was just seeing things. I just went home and started pacing. I couldn't think straight. You'll understand, one day."

"I guess."

At the entrance to the hotel, Yasui pulled out the Time Frame and told it to show the time Nisrina specified. It lit up and showed the scene, and she adjusted it backwards and forwards until we watched what looked like Bahodir get out of a car, help another woman get out, and go inside.

"It's like looking in a mirror!" gasped Bahodir. "But that isn't me, I swear to you!"

Every head swiveled to Nanda, who nodded.

"At least we know something physical was there, and it wasn't just in your mind. Come on, let's see what the receptionist can tell us."

The hotel was small, but comfortable, with a few plush chairs scattered about and a miniature waterfall stuck to the wall. We headed over to the desk, where a 20 something young woman was watching us curiously.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"Have you seen me before?" demanded Bahodir.

"Maybe? Somewhere around town I suppose. Why?"

"That's the trouble with living in a small community like this, everyone has probably seen everyone else," he remarked to us. He turned back to her. "Specifically, I need to know if someone using my name checked into this hotel three weeks ago. Because they sure as heck were using my face!"

"Why don't I just go get the manager?" she asked, backing off. She knocked on a door behind the desk and stuck her head in. A middle aged man came out, looking concerned.

“What’s this all about?”

“You’re the manager?”

“That’s right.”

“I have reason to believe someone is impersonating me. I need to know who checked in at 5:34 three weeks ago Tuesday.”

“We don’t usually give out that sort of information,” he stalled.

“You will now, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Are you threatening me, sir?”

“Okay, everybody take a step back,” Yasui said. “Look, we don’t need their help. I’ll just point the Time Frame at the desk here and we can see for ourselves what name they gave.” She brought it up again, activating it.

Oh yeah, that would be the smart way to go.

We all watched as the couple came in, as the manager sputtered about how irregular this all was. We ignored him and focused on hearing the name the guy used, but it was the woman who paid for and signed for the room. So we got her name, Felecia Bernard, and she called the man Ulugbek as they headed up the stairs.

“Thank you, you’ve been most helpful,” said Bahodir sarcastically, before turning on his heel and walking out. “So he wasn’t using my name,” he said. “That’s odd.”

“If I were having an affair, I wouldn’t use my real name either,” said Nisrina, but more thoughtfully than snarkily.

“Still, we have a name now, and she’s obviously connected to the Foundation. Let’s head up to the school and get in touch with them. They’ll know where she is, and maybe she can answer some questions for us.”

So as a group we went back to the teleport point, basically a small guard house covering the circle we used to get here, and went back. We headed up to Lucian's office and were let inside.

“How goes it?” he asked. “Solved the case yet?” He chuckled.

“Not yet,” I said. “We need to know about a woman named Felecia Bernard. Slightly taller than me, thin glasses, dark skin.”

“Wait, you actually made progress on this thing?”

“We did.” I introduced Nisrina, Bahodir, and Nanda, and told them about the oddness with the double we saw.

“This is a puzzle, isn’t it? I think I’ve heard that name before, though. So, you want to speak to her to find out who that man was?”

“I want some answers, yes,” said Bahodir.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I see. Give me a second.” He found a name in his *paper rolodex* and dialed the number. “Hello, this is Lucian DeLefeu calling. Fine, yourself? Good. I’m looking for information regarding a Felecia Bernard. I’ll wait.” He waited. “On assignment? What time is it there? Uh huh. Would she be able to get away? She’s needed at the school right away, but only for a few minutes to clear something up. You’ll try her cell? Fantastic, thank you. I’ll hold.” We waited a few minutes. “I’m here. She can? Great. Ten minutes? Thanks.” He hung the phone up. “She’ll be here. Let’s go down and meet her.”

We went down to the teleport circles room and waited, but we didn’t have to wait long. A woman, probably in her mid 40s, appeared in the circle and looked around.

Her face lit up in a grin when she saw Bahodir. “Ulugbek!” she cried, bouncing over to him. “How in the world did you get here?” She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. He struggled to break away.

“I’ve never seen this woman before in my life!” he insisted to his wife, who was nearly shooting fire out her eyeballs.

Actually, as an ESPer she wouldn’t need to use her eyeballs, she could just do it with her mind.

Felecia laughed. “Is this some kind of joke? We’ve known each other for fifteen years. Who are all these people? What’s this about?”

“This is my wife, Nisrina, and my step son, Nanda. These are his... classmates. How do you think you know me?”

“Come on, Ulugbek, this isn’t funny. What’s going on here?”

Yasui leaned towards me and whispered “You don’t think this is another reality change, do you? Like the principal’s cane?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look,” Bahodir was saying. “Who do you think I am?”

“You’re Ulugbek Karimov, of course. I last saw you a week ago, before I went on assignment in Paraguay. Have you lost your memory or something?”

“No, I can remember everything that happened the last fifteen years and I’ve never seen you before. She’s lying, right? She must be lying. Son, tell me she’s lying!”

Nanda shook his head. “Sorry dad, but as far as she’s concerned, she’s telling the truth. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I do,” I said. “Let’s go to where this Ulugbek person lives and see what’s there. If he’s there, you two can hash it out. Maybe you just look really alike, I don’t know.”

“Fine,” Bahodir said. “Let’s take care of this once and for all.”

“There’s no circle near there,” she said. “The closest one is like two hundred miles away at least. Though they have been coming in handy. Whoever thought of doing this was a genius, we just need more of them in more places.”

I blushed.

“We’re working on it,” said Lucian with a grin. “For now, just get us as close as possible.”

We stepped through another circle to the country where they lived, which was Mexico apparently, and DeLefeu started getting a ward out of his pouch. We passed out of the apparently run down building that hid the place, and he made sure no one was nearby.

“The place is warded, so there shouldn’t be, but it never hurts to be cautious.”

He set the ward down and gestured at us to move back. We did, and he concentrated on it, activating it from a distance with the actuation technique. A limo appeared.

“You have a limo stuffed in a contain ward?” I asked, surprised.

“You never know what you might need!” he said cheerfully. “Everybody get in.”

As they all started to, I remarked “But it’ll still take us hours to get there if it’s hundreds of miles away.”

“Oh, you think so?” He started pulling more wards out and slapping them on the body of the car, then climbed into the driver’s seat. “You coming?”

I shrugged, and got in, closing the door behind me. Lucian concentrated, and the limo rose into the air, then shot forward.

“Where should I go from here?” he asked over the intercom to us.

“A little bit more to the right, I’ll guide you when we get closer,” answered Felecia, looking out the window.

“Roger that.”

“I take it those wards were something like ignore?” I asked, taking the intercom microphone.

“That’s right. Hold on, we’re going to fly!” The car shot forward faster and the ground sped beneath us.

“Nice of the principal to do this for us,” remarked Nisrina.

“I’m sort of his prized pupil,” I said modestly, buffing my fingernails on my jacket. I leaned close. “And quite honestly I don’t think he gets out much. He probably likes the distraction.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Before long we were landing the limo and walking to the house Felicia pointed out. She knocked and opened the door.

“Ulugbek, you here?”

“Felicia?” a voice cried from inside, and Bahodir walked out into view. “Uh?”

“Who are you?” shouted Bahodir. “How do you have my face?”

“This is the face I’ve always had. Who are you?”

“I think this is going to take a while,” said Osman, looking between the two men.

After some questioning, the truth of the matter came out. It took some doing by both Nanda and Nisrina, but between them and some phone calls to Nanda’s grandparents, they got the story. Turned out that the two were twins, separated shortly after being born. Bahodir protested that his parents had stayed together, and they weren’t that badly off financially, there would have been no reason for their parents to give up one of their sons. Lucian brought up the point that he was an inheritor, which complicated things. In the rare situations where twins were born, and were not expected to have any other power then that, one child was given away so problems didn’t arise later.

“You mean fights over the item?” asked Yasui, absentmindedly stroking her right boot.

“Exactly. If you had two sons, twins, and you knew only one of them could inherit those boots, and the other would be powerless, how would you choose which son got them?”

“I’m... not sure.”

“Well, believe me, it’s gotten ugly in the past. You don’t have any powers, do you Mr Karimov?”

He shook his head. “No, but Felicia does, and she told me about how things really work. She had to, if we were going to be together, because she’s always traveling. Of course she stays here when she can.”

“Of course.”

“And now I have a brother! This is a great day! Thank you so much for bringing us together!” he said to me.

“Yes, I didn’t expect this. I expected a fight to the death with some kind of clone or something.” Bahodir laughed.

“Just solving the case, and it was my pleasure.”

“We better get back,” said Lucian. “Would you like to stay a while?” he asked Bahodir.

“I would,” he answered, “but you’re my ride.”

“Here,” he handed Bahodir a ward. “Just throw it on the ground and you can step through the circle it makes back to the island. You’ll be redirected to the school bus loop rather than the circles room, but you can get back to town from there, right?”

“I sure can. Thanks.”

“Of course. Let me pack up the car again and we’ll be heading back ourselves. Nice to meet you all.”

As he was putting the car away, Elizabeth came over to me. “So what do you think the odds are that this guy’s twin bother goes into a hotel at exactly the time needed for the other brother’s wife to see him? Then their son comes to us just as we start this club and we figure out what’s going on. I mean that’s pretty improbable, right? Any one of those things not happening and they never would have met.”

“I guess, but stranger things have happened.”

“Like the glitter incident.”

“Sure. Why the interest? Improbable things happen all the time.”

She shook her head. “I lost a lot of classmates with holy power to seemingly random chance after we all got powers. I’m suspicious of anything that seems to happen by accident now.”

“This was something good, so I don’t think you’ll have to worry.”

“I hope so, because that circle and this have me just a little freaked out. But if you say it’s nothing, I’ll believe you.”

“For the moment, it’s nothing. I’ll let you know when you should freak out.”

“Fair enough.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

5

Expanding circles

*“I’ll be there for you, ‘cause you’re
there for me too” --theme from Friends*

We returned to the school and I went to my room feeling uplifted. The Helping People Club had worked! Someone had come to us with a real, actual, honest to goodness problem and our club helped solve it. Sure, it wasn’t as glamorous as demon slaying or flashy as using our powers, but it was more satisfying. We even solved a problem two brothers didn’t know they had- the other brother’s existence. Everyone had some good ideas, and we had an early success to brag about and build momentum with. As I finished my homework for that night I couldn’t have been happier, and Osman too seemed in high spirits.

We didn’t get any new problems the rest of that week, but I did notice Elizabeth always had her bag jammed full of books, and asked her about it a week and a half after our first case. Most of us had taken to hanging out in our “clubroom” even when it wasn’t our day, just to study and do homework together. Yasui had brought in a small whiteboard to hang on the wall, with “Solved Cases” and “Unsolved Cases” written on it. There was only the one “Solved” case, which she had written as “The Case of the Missing Twin.” We were all looking forward to the second case.

“You don’t have to learn everything there is to learn about the supernatural world in the first month, you know,” I said to Elizabeth, looking at the books she had in her bag.

“Oh, I’m just a bookworm by nature,” she replied, looking up from her dark arts textbook. “I only had two real friends in junior high, no one

else would put up with the amount of reading I did. But you guys don't mind, I see you reading talisman books just as much."

"Yeah, you would think he would have them memorized by now," remarked Yasui.

"They're just so fascinating, I can't stop reading about them," I replied. "But wait, why do you have a dark arts textbook? You're a freshman, you won't take that until later, as an elective."

"It's my elective this year, because of my weird, uneven training. Hey, I should introduce you to my old friends, I'm sure they'd love to meet you too. I'll bring them along one day, one of them is a petitioner, like you, Osman. So I'm sure you might have some things to talk about." She got a dark look. "And actually he owes you a thanks, Dean. You saved him from being cursed just as much as you saved me."

"I'd love to meet them."

"Are they girls?" asked Yasui.

"Nope, both boys."

"I guess you're just a heartbreaker," she mumbled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Anyway," Osman broke in, "I knew you had a lot more experience than most coming in, but how in the world did you swing taking electives already?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Most first year students take the spirit manipulation class," she explained. "I tested out of it."

"You're that good at spirit manipulation?" I asked, surprised.

"Oh, I had to get good at it, and fast, once I got my powers. In fact I picked it up a little too fast, if you want to know the truth." She looked concerned.

"What do you mean?" asked Yasui.

"Allow me to demonstrate," she said, closing her eyes. A few seconds later, the ground started shaking in what felt like a minor earthquake, which lasted a few seconds before she reined her power in.

"That was you?" I asked.

"That was me," she replied, opening her eyes again. "When I first got powers and my energy shot up overnight, naturally I couldn't control it. Because I have so much of it, and it was basically forced into me, my spirit overflow as I now know to call it was particularly bad. The so called "Zephyr" people that were training us concentrated on teaching me how to rein it in. They said it would take a couple of weeks to get it under control

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

fully. But just as mysteriously as I got the powers, I seemed to master the technique, literally overnight. Now maybe one of them snuck in and implanted memories in my brain that helped me master it? I don't know. All I know is, I got good at the skill fast, and I've put a lot of practice into making sure it doesn't get loose. So, they exempted me and let me pick another class. I picked dark arts. I'm hoping they cover stuff like why that group was worshipping a statue, that sort of thing."

"Neat," I said. "Is the rest of your schedule normal?"

"Mostly. I practiced calling out Anthy over the summer a *ton* so I'm pretty good at that. I'm fair at calling out spirits, and I started learning a few advanced spirit energist techniques from a bakeneko that worked for the Watchers. But I completely lack the basics, like any skill in aiming energy blasts."

"I would have thought that's the first thing this group would have taught you," said Yasui.

Elizabeth shook her head. "They tried. I flat out refused, for the very reason that *was* the first thing they wanted me to learn. Even at the beginning, my friends and I were suspicious of this group that showed up out of nowhere to 'train' us in our powers. I didn't want to learn anything that destructive in case they could take me over or something through my powers. Of course, what they did do was ten times worse."

"What was that?" I asked. Everyone had now stopped what they were doing and were listening to the story.

"Let my inner demon loose. They knew she existed, and basically forced me to call her out against my better judgement. After I learned what she was, I wanted to wait until someone came along that could train me to suppress the thing. But no, they 'had to know what they were dealing with.' Jerks. I had a sort of mental block on using shaman powers, and I was totally content to learn things like energy barrier, you know, defensive techniques. But they insisted, and I got though the block and called her out. That was a disaster, let me tell you. She got out, and the first thing she did was nearly kill Sam, one of the friends I told you about. I finally got her put back, but by then the damage was done. She was woken up, and started talking to me. Later she got out while I was sleeping, and killed a couple of people." She looked sad. "They were criminals, according to her, but I was still pretty messed up after that happened."

"Wait a second, that's not possible!" I said. "If you go unconscious your spirit projection vanishes. That's how it works! Sleeping is most definitely unconscious."

Elizabeth shrugged. “Don’t look at me, I just know it happened. She was out for days before we finally tracked her down.”

“Weird... and disturbing. Though I suppose we saw, or rather read about, that curse you were under in the original timeline. The one that made you lose all your powers? Could you have been cursed to let her run free until you caught her again, or something?”

“Maybe, I never thought of that! But to what end?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe they wanted you more dependent on them?” asked Osman. “Maybe they figured if she got out, you would be more inclined to listen to them and do what they said to make sure it didn’t happen again.”

“That’s just it, the seer that was going to help me got killed the day she was going to start looking into it. They never offered any help in that area again.”

“Wait, she died the very same day?” I asked.

She nodded. “Just hours before, in fact. Why?”

We all looked at each other. “More odd probability stuff, like the glitter. We’ll have to keep our eyes open, see if other strange coincidences crop up. The problem may be more serious than I first thought.”

“Oh, I should mention, you know those odd things you mentioned, like how the reality might have changed for the brothers?”

“Yeah?” I asked.

“The more I think about it, the more I believe I knew another technique before. I can’t remember much, but somehow the name ‘Strawberry Moon’ sticks in my mind. And I remember a floating woman, too, with wild hair. A naked, floating woman.”

“I’d remember a naked, floating woman myself!” I exclaimed.

“Of course you would,” said Yasui.

“And flying,” she went on. “On a bird made of lightning? I don’t know, maybe I just dreamed it. It feels like a dream. I just thought I would mention it.”

“I’ll put it in the big book of mysteries,” I said, miming opening a large book and writing something down.

“Actually we could make something like that, just so we don’t forget anything. It could be related, all these odd occurrences.”

“Sure, no harm in it. I’ll pick something suitable up from the bookstore tomorrow.”

“We’ve never seen your projection!” said Yasui. “We’ve seen Dean’s, let’s see yours!”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I don’t know, is that okay?”

“You have your inner demon under control, right?”

“Oh yes, she knows to behave herself, or I lock her cozy little prison. But we aren’t supposed to use powers outside the classroom, right?”

“Really?” I asked in mock surprise. “I must have missed that memo.”

“Hey, if you’ve cleared it, I’m going to blame you if a teacher walks by and calls me on it. Clear a space.”

We pushed the desks out of the way and stood behind Elizabeth, who gathered herself. “Okay Anthony, come out and meet everyone!”

Suddenly, there was a giant, brown colored ant standing there, looking at us. It was as tall as I was, and as I looked closely, I saw it had wings. It raised a front leg in greeting.

“Everyone, this is Anthony. Anthony, this is everyone!”

“Hi Anthony!” we all said.

“What can she do?” asked Yasui. “I know Dean’s beaver can heal, but that’s really the only special power it has. Right?”

“That’s right,” I replied. “I can’t really learn any healing techniques, though of course I could pick up the healing ward, which I may do, now that I think about it.” I said that last mostly to myself. “Anyway, he’s pretty good at energy blast and barrier, because apparently he doesn’t have my limitations on only being able to learn the fringes of powers. Why am I blathering on, you were supposed to be telling us about Anthony.”

Elizabeth giggled. “It’s okay. Anthony, why don’t you show them?” Suddenly, the ant got twice as big, and had to duck down to avoid smashing into the lights that hung from the ceiling. “Maybe smaller would have been better,” she apologized, and the ant shrank back down to normal size, then became half our size. “I always wanted to ride her sometime, I think that would be pretty cool.” Anthony’s wings buzzed, and she lifted off the ground. “Of course she’s a spirit energist like me, so she’s good at energy attack, even if I’m not. Like really good, I don’t think it can be dodged, she throws them so fast. I haven’t really been in combat with her much, but I think she’s really fast on her own, and of course she has even more energy than I do! Oh, and one other thing. Show them your ‘anthill’ technique, Anthony!” She seemed to ripple, and there were two ants standing there now.

“Hey,” complained Yasui, “that’s stealing my spirit clone technique! No fair!”

Elizabeth laughed. “Sorry. But it makes sense, doesn’t it? Ants work together, and she can become a whole army, if I don’t mind splitting her energy up.”

“Yeah, Anthy is way better than your beaver, Dean. Sorry,” said Yasui. “She’s got you beat there.”

“I agree,” I said. “Anthy, Anthy, welcome. I would be honored to fight at your sides.”

Both gave a little bow, and vanished.

“So now you know a little more about me,” said Elizabeth. “I hope you aren’t too disappointed.”

“Disappointed? You’ve been through a bunch of stuff, learned all about your powers basically on your own, had your own powers turn against you, and you’re still sane. That says something. Most freshman in their second week of school are still walking around in a daze and jumping at cambions that walk by- you’re amazing.”

“Thanks,” she said, coloring.

We put the desks back together, and I totally missed the look of determination on Yasui’s face as she looked at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, true to her word, introduced us to her friends from Junior High the next day. They were two boys, one with dark skin, one with light. The dark skinned one had the longest hair I had ever seen, separated into 7 strands, looped around to form a U shape, and tied at the top again. The other was a brown haired, blue eyed, fine, upstanding, American boy. Both had the american flag on their uniform.

“Everyone, this is Sam,” Elizabeth indicated the darker skinned boy, “and Matt. Matt, this is Dean, the one that saved us from the progenitor.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Matt, offering me his hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier to thank you more directly. Elizabeth has been telling us all about you.”

“Nice to meet you, too. Guess you both had some adventures of your own. Being here has probably been pretty overwhelming for you.”

“You can say that again,” said Sam. “Both to the adventures and being overwhelming. You seem like you can handle yourself, the way you popped in and took care of that progenitor. Saved us from a protracted fight, and for that I’m grateful.” He also shook hands with me.

I laughed. “Just a lot of preparation beforehand, believe me. So, how are you finding life on the island? Adjusting okay?”

“This place is amazing,” said Matt honestly, sitting down at the table. “And that village we saw, everyone here has powers?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Most do. Some normal people come here with spouses, but everyone knows about powers here. It’s pretty nice.”

“You live here, right?” asked Sam.

“Sure do. My parents aren’t trained for field work, but as an alchemist, primarily, and artificer, their creations help out others.”

Matt grinned. “Is that why the club?” he asked, pointing to our whiteboard with the solved case on it.

“Partially. I just like doing good things for people. Why? Something I can help with?”

“Not me,” answered Matt, “but Sam has been complaining about something ever since he got his power.”

“I’m a spirit hunter,” he said, showing us the arm with the pin that represented his power. “But I’m powerless until I leave my body, for the most part. I’m finally getting the hang of incantations, but that’s neither here nor there. What bugs me is my body just lays around when I’m projecting. That got me in trouble once, let me tell you. I had to run all the way to the hospital... What really irks me is that other spirit hunters don’t seem to care, or just accept it as normal. That Drumlie guy, our professor, who I don’t like very much by the way, just says ‘deal with it’ and won’t offer any other suggestions.”

“We had a lot of trouble with the society,” Elizabeth explained. “They don’t take kindly to people like me, with divided souls. I truly feared for my life the first time I visited their headquarters.”

“We haven’t had too many dealings with them, but I know our philosophies are different,” said Yasui.

“Yeah, very different,” spat Sam. “Drumlie keeps saying I should get a real spirit hunter education, not this imitation one the Foundation provides. I keep turning him down. What Elizabeth went through with them soured me on the group, as a whole.”

“I can’t help you with that,” I said, “but as for the other, I think I know just the thing.”

“Really?”

“There’s a ward that will animate your body while you’re projecting. Not great in the long run, because you’ll have to keep getting wards, but I have a solution for that too.”

“I don’t mind getting wards. That sounds ideal!”

“Ah, you say that now... but really, carrying around a bunch of easily torn pieces of paper? No, a talisman it is, and the translation of a ward into a talisman isn’t that bad.”

“How did I know your solution would be a talisman?” asked Yasui.

“The solution to almost any problem is a talisman. It’s in the rules somewhere,” I joked.

“Money,” she said, digging around in a pocket and pulling out a dollar bill.

“I’m not going to *charge* him!” *Though I’ll have to buy the ink...*

“No, no! It’s cloth, right?” She waved it about. “And it doesn’t weigh anything. Couldn’t you turn paper into this same kind of cloth? This stuff lasts, and you can roll it up or fold it much easier than paper.”

“Well, yes, I suppose I could.”

“Anyway,” said Sam, bringing the conversation back to him. “I could pop out of my body and this talisman you could make me would take over? Get me to safety if needed? Exorcise and eat for me if I was away for some time?”

“Exactly. Let me see now...” I went over to a computer that was in the classroom and logged onto my account. I went into the artificer section and brought up the page for estimating how much work a talisman would take. Punching in some numbers, I hit the calculate button. “Ten hours,” I announced. “I could make it a tattoo or an item, both of which you would have to touch and channel energy into. Once done, it would last... oh, I think I could guarantee at least twenty hours. You won’t get that from anyone else, either,” I bragged. I was good at my craft, after all. “It will cost \$50 in supplies though.”

“Done!” said Sam. “What do we have to do?”

“I can get started now, if you want. You’ll have to be nearby while I work on it, so you’ll have to stop by every day.”

“Not a problem. And I’ll take the tattoo, I think. Less likely to be lost or stolen.”

“A tattoo it is. I have one or two myself.” I showed him the wind attack one on my hand, and Osman showed the similar one on his.

“Nice,” said Sam, nodding. “If there’s anything I can ever do for you, just ask.”

I rubbed my hands together. “Oh, there is,” I said in an imitation Ursula voice. “You can’t get something for nothing, you know?”

“Oh dear.”

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. I want to study incantations, but no spirit hunter will teach me. Believe me, I’ve asked.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Why though, you won’t be able to use them.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Ho Ho Ho, don’t be so sure. You just let me worry about that.”

“What are incantations anyway?” asked Yasui.

“Basically a specific manipulation of spirit energy, gestures, and chants to produce a quasi-magic effect,” I explained. “I’ll never be very good at them, but if there’s a way I could learn a couple that let me do something I wouldn’t be able to otherwise, it would further increase my versatility.”

“Like you need more abilities,” said Yasui grumpily.

“Yeah! I just wish I knew someone who could teach me magic!”

“Actually, I might be able to help there,” spoke up Matt.

My eyes got wide and I put on a hopeful expression. “Tell me more, good buddy, old pal, old friend!”

He laughed. “There’s a phoenix named Iris I’ve been working with. As you know they have the potential to use magic, but most don’t bother to actually learn any. With the number of times I’ve called upon his help the past few months he decided he should take it up, and he’s been in Heaven leaning what he can about it.”

“Do you think he’d be willing to teach me?”

“I’ll ask, it wouldn’t hurt. He might have you prove your worth or something? I don’t know. Magic is pretty powerful.”

“Hey, I saved the entire world, plus Heaven, and the demon world, and at great personal risk, I might add. But yeah, whatever he thinks is best. And don’t worry, I can only learn the basics of magic, I wouldn’t be able to blow stuff up. Anyway, I have talismans for that.”

“We both do,” put in Osman.

“Well, you are friends with a petitioner, that would work in your favor. Hey, why don’t I just call him here right now, see what he says?”

I put up my hands. “One thing at a time. I promised Sam his talisman first, and I don’t want to get distracted from that. Plus, I might want to learn certain things as incantations and other things as spells. After all, one might be easier than another for all I know. Plus magic might work in places spirit energy stuff doesn’t, and I’ll have to review what I can do and what I would like to do. This has opened a whole new avenue to explore, so I want to consider carefully what my options are.”

“Okay,” said Matt. “Magic can do pretty much anything, from what Iris says, I don’t know about incantations.”

“Pretty much the same,” said Sam, “but it’s harder because you have to concentrate on it to the exclusion of everything else. We typically use them for instantaneous stuff.”

“Like explosions?” I asked.

“Pretty much.”

“Okay. Even if I only learn one or two, just to get the feel of it, that would be great.”

“You’ll have to tell me what sort of thing you want to do. Drumlie never lets the books he has on the subject out of his sight, so I’ll have to learn it, then come here and teach it to you.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No way. If you can keep my body safe while I’m ‘away’ from it, that would be worth a lot to me. And once other spirit hunters see it, maybe you’ll get more business.” He leaned in close and dropped his voice. “Charge them an arm and a leg!”

I laughed. “Technically we can’t charge for our powers while at school. But yeah, afterwards, of course. Still, a bunch of spirit hunters just owing me a big favor could come in handy someday.”

Sam reached into his back pocket. “I have some of the money now, I’ll have to get you the rest later.”

“Okay, this ink isn’t cheap. I should learn how to make it, and just buy the raw materials directly.” I sighed. “Another thing to put on my list of things to do. Let’s get started!”

The phoenix's Task

*You must chop down the mightiest
tree in the forest with... a herring! --Monty Python*

And so for the next week and a half I worked on Sam's new talisman, and got to know him and Matt. He and Osman had many discussions about petitioning, and Matt was fascinated about Kat. The stories of what happened to their class after they got powers, from a "super hero" group being formed to a summoner that went bad were interesting, and they all seemed pretty nice.

I finished the tattoo and decided while it wasn't my best work, it was at least passable. It was just a design, after all. I applied it to Sam who immediately went into spirit hunter form to test it out. He sat down in a chair and suddenly a much less dressed version of him was standing there. He was wearing just a leopard skin loincloth, to which Yasui said merely: "Oh my." He was pretty ripped, I had to admit. He touched the tattoo on his arm and the body stirred, then stood up, looking around.

"I guess it worked," the body said.

"I guess so!" said Sam, impressed. "You can understand me?"

"Of course," it replied. "It would be rather useless if you wanted me to go hide and I couldn't understand your intent."

"True. Wow, it's weird, looking at myself from this angle. I've always been 'asleep' so to speak, so to hear myself and everything is wild."

The body shrugged. "Doesn't do anything for me."

Sam turned to me. "That seems perfect, thanks."

"Not a problem. Just don't have it try to take any tests for you. It has your brain but not your brainpower, if you know what I mean."

“Gotcha. As agreed, I’ll start teaching you incantations. If you’ve figured out which ones you want to learn, anyway.”

“It’ll have to be something really simple.”

“I do know a pretty simple one. It’ll dazzle an opponent’s senses, make it easier for you to hit them, or get away if you’d rather.”

“That would be a great start!”

“Okay. Do you want to check out magic first, though? I know Matt has been talking with Iris about it.”

“If he doesn’t mind bringing Iris here now,” I said, looking over at Matt.

“No problem at all. I’ll put him right on that desk there.” He started a petitioning prayer, and moments later a beautiful bird was sitting on the desk. We had seen phoenixes before, at the world tree, and this one looked about the same. A brilliantly plumed bird, standing at my height on the desk and looking around with interest.

“Hello Matt,” he said, spying him standing there. “Ah, and you must be the Dean I’ve heard so much about?”

“I am. Thank you for coming to speak to me.”

“That’s quite all right. So, you want to learn magic, do you?”

“That’s right. The basics, at least. Maybe a few spells, just to augment my other abilities.”

“What exactly are your other abilities? Matt wasn’t too clear on how exactly I was going to be able to teach you magic at all.”

“I’m a descendent of Cain,” I admitted. “My father was, as well. He’s focused his efforts on alchemy, where I stared out as an artificer.”

“I see. Poor old Cain, still wandering around.”

“I don’t think he’s hurting,” said Yasui. “From what’s written about him, he’s almost a force of nature on Earth, he’s so powerful.”

“True, true. But to never know the Heavenly realms?” Iris shook his head. “A real pity. Anyway, it’s not really my call to make. We’ll need to head outside, if that’s okay with all of you.”

“It’s not too cold out, yet. And it’s sunny today, so it won’t be unpleasant. Let’s go. You, uh, want to go out the window?”

Iris looked around. “That’s probably best. I’m pretty awkward on two legs.”

We opened the window and he flew out, and we made our way out to where he was waiting. It seemed he was casting a spell, as some kind of energy was swirling around him. I watched with interest as circles of light, not unlike the circles I would have to spend manually drawing out, appeared and disappeared as he continued casting. A few minutes later he fin-

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

ished and inside the circle appeared another phoenix, but this one was twice as large as he was. The other noticeable difference- four wings! I wasn't sure how that worked but it must.

"Who's calling me with magic?" demanded the new arrival, looking around. "What's the meaning of- Iris?"

"Forgive me, Prince Bennu, but I crave a word with you about this human."

"This better be good. I was busy... um... okay, I wasn't actually in the middle of anything at the moment. Wow, Earth huh? Takes me back. I haven't been here in- is this the school?" Bennu was looking around with interest.

"It is," answered Iris. "This boy, a student here," he indicated me with a wing, "is interested in learning magic. As I've recently started learning magic myself, I thought teaching him might reinforce my own lessons."

"Magic? You want to give a human access to magic? Which one?" He turned to me. "He doesn't have the spark, it's impossible. Now send me back."

"With respect, prince, he's a decendent of Cain."

Bennu gave a long "Oh," and looked me over more carefully. "So," he said at last. "Want to learn magic, huh? Why?"

"Because I want to learn all I can about my abilities. I've mastered just about everything I reasonably can, and this would be a unique challenge for me."

"I see. So your aim isn't just power, then?"

"As you are familiar with what I am, you know I can never be a powerful spell caster. With respect, I'm already a pretty powerful artificer. But there are some things even wards can't do, but maybe magic could."

"Pride in one's accomplishments isn't a bad thing, if it isn't taken too far."

"I shall say no more about it."

"Good." He looked around. "Quite a group here. Let's see if I remember what the pins mean. A spirit energist, (Christina had come that day) two petitioners, a martial artist, a spirit hunter, a shaman and an artificer." He pointed a wing at us as he named our pins. We all nodded. "And I sense a fair amount of energy from most of you- wait a second. Samson!?"

Sam sighed. "That is the identity of my soul, yes."

"Well, well, this is interesting." He jerked his head back to look at me. "Ever summoned any demons?"

I shook my head. "I could have, but I thought without being able to learn banishing or binding to any degree it might be too dangerous. Even the least of demons is devious, crafty, and not to be taken lightly."

“Well said. What about angels?”

Again I indicated I hadn't. “I think angels are a little too powerful for me to handle. I saw how Osman, my roommate who is an actual petitioner, struggled with the skill. Plus with me not being one, I wasn't sure if they would take kindly to it.”

“Probably not,” he admitted. “So that was a good call too. Let's say I do allow him to teach you. What sort of spells would you want to learn? Magic is actually pretty dangerous. If you get it wrong you can get yourself killed, you know?”

“Nothing like that,” I said quickly. “Just easy magic to supplement my own powers. That's all. I know of one spell, it kept being used against me in a battle with demons some time ago. They were deflecting attacks thrown at them.”

“Probably better if you just dodged, but I get the idea. Okay, I have something in mind, but I'll have to talk to your principal. His office is still up there, I take it?” He pointed with a wing up to the tower that sat in the middle of the school.

“That's right.”

“Okay, meet us up there. Come on, Iris.”

Both took off, Bennu's four wings lifting him easily and shooting him ahead of Iris.

We took the long route.

When we got to the office, both phoenixes were sitting in the windowsills, and Lucian was exchanging pleasantries with them.

“Ah, they're here. Good. I don't suppose he's discussed this with you already, has he?”

“Discussed what, holy phoenix?”

“I thought not. He wants permission to learn magic from my subject here.”

“Mag-” Lucian but his head in his hands. “Dean? You want to learn magic now?”

“I want to learn everything now, that hasn't changed.”

“You know how dangerous magic is, right?”

“I've been made aware. Still, if I stick to easy spells I'm sure I'll be fine.”

He raised his head. “I suppose. What does that have to do with me?”

“Two things,” said Bennu. “First, I wanted to get your opinion on the matter before I made my decision. If you would be dead set against it, then I would of course take that as the final word on the subject. If that isn't the case, then I need your permission to send him on a quest to make sure he's worthy of this gift.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“What sort of quest?”

“An informed question. Are you familiar at all with the legend of the phoenix egg?” Everyone shook their heads. “I’m not surprised. Most outside the phoenix community wouldn’t. I’ll need to provide a little background.

“As you may or may not know, phoenixes were created by the All-Father directly. As you know, when we die we immolate in fire, and another phoenix rises from the ashes. Thus, we are effectively immortal, though not practically. The bird that rises will have a different personality and different strengths than the old one that died. So the number of phoenixes has stayed constant. However, so legends say, two phoenixes decided they were going to do something about that. They first learned the magic of shape-shift and became human. This allowed them to create two rings, each with a peculiar bit of magic in it. One ring would turn anyone who wore it into a phoenix.

“A male phoenix. The other, of course, was for a female.”

You can bind magic into objects like I do with spirit energy and talismans? I thought. Interesting.

Bennu went on. “They took some time to work out the specifics, as we are normally genderless, but in the end a single egg was laid. It was hidden away, unhatched, lest the All-Father grow angry at the affront of his creatures not trusting Him to know what was best for them. However, as the years have gone by I’ve come to the conclusion that He gave us magic for a reason. He gave us the ability to think for a reason. If we want to use magic and it’s possible for that magic to produce more phoenixes, maybe we should do it.

“I want you to track down that egg, and see if the legend is true.”

“It wouldn’t have hatched by now?” asked Yasui.

“Perhaps,” said Bennu. “But every phoenix from the beginning is known to me, and no new ones have cropped up. So either the story is false, or the egg is still hidden somewhere. It may need phoenix fire to hatch, as that is how new phoenixes are created normally. So it could still be viable, after all this time.”

“Do you have any leads?” asked Lucian. “I can’t just let them into the world with a vague ‘see if anything turns up.’ You understand.”

“I do. We in Heaven keep a close eye on those that amass power and money on Earth, as they may be making deals with demons. Of course we cannot act on that information, but there have been times our agents here have been notified, and stepped in. Currently there are three men on Earth that have a penchant for collecting objects related to the supernatural world. The will, and the means, as such items are rare and fetch a high

price. I can give you the addresses. Start there. Something as rare and beautiful as a phoenix's egg would no doubt command a high price. Even if they don't have it, their networks of knowing who has what might lead you to it.

"Of course, getting that information is up to you. I caution you, remember who you're working for, and what you hope to gain. Show me you are worthy of being taught magic."

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you," I reply.

"I suppose if Heaven sanctions it... Where do they have to go?" Lucian asked, eyes rolled back to look at the ceiling.

Once the addresses were at hand, I told prince Bennu I would make the attempt this weekend, so as to not miss any classes. He said to proceed in my own time, and took his leave.

Osman asked Iris and Matt if they minded him petitioning Iris from time to time, and both said they didn't mind.

"I don't own him," chuckled Matt. "If he wants to work with you, it's fine with me. You'll have to petition him to give the lessons anyway."

"Thanks," I said gratefully.

That weekend, 8:00 AM, we met with the principal outside the teleport circles room.

"Are you all going?" he asked.

"We're going to check them simultaneously," I explained. "I want to have this done before the weekend is over."

"But you're supposed to be finding this thing," he protested. "How are you going to do that if your friends are off finding it someplace else?"

I laughed. "You didn't forget who you're talking to, did you? Spirit clone!" I put as much energy as I could into my attempt at making clones, and was rewarded with the feeling that I could make an additional four copies of myself. However, I only needed two, so I allowed those two to appear.

"Tada!" we all shouted at once, making jazz hands.

Lucian groaned. "I see. I suppose that counts. Here, I've programmed these to get you closer once you're off the island." He handed over six wards and a roughly drawn map. "They're all a slight distance away, under cover, so you won't be spotted. The other one is for getting back to the teleport point so you can get back here. A Foundation, Watcher or spirit hunter agent will be nearby, not that I don't trust you all, but in case you run into trouble there will be an adult with powers ready to help. Just so you know, I consulted Miss LaRoche about these little trips of

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

yours. Of course she couldn't tell your futures, but one answer she did get is they're necessary somehow, and you'll learn an important fact that will come into play later. So don't think these little extra field trips will be customary." He pulled out a bunch more wards. "These are for the non English speaking countries, they've got communication built into them."

"Thanks." I paused, looking at him. "Are you all right, Mr DeLe-feu?" I asked. "You seem... tense."

"I've just been thinking about how wise it was to allow you to learn so many different skills, and send you so many places. sending you to learn from a soul wielder, letting you go to the demon world to rescue your parents. What was I thinking?" He sighed. "Too late now, though. I just hope I haven't created a monster I'll regret later on."

The me to my right spoke up. "With respect, Sir, I'm on a mission to prove myself to the prince of the phoenixes. If I can convince him I'm worthy to be given access to magic, even as little as I'll be able to use, do you really feel I'm going bad?"

"No, I suppose not. I guess I should be glad you are on our side."

The me to my left stepped forward. "It's because you let me do those things that I am, don't you see? Without letting me rescue my parents, and learn how to take down vessels without exploding the most likely innocent souls inside, I would have mistrusted you and never listened to you at all. And don't forget, it's because I showed you how valuable soul wielder powers were that they now are welcome to come here and train. I want your respect, because you've shown me you're a fair, honest teacher that sees what needs to be done, and lets me do it. You're my role model, and I'm not just saying that. Is that really something to be ashamed of?"

"You do have a way with words, don't you, Dean? Deans? Get going."

"Thank you, Sir. Everyone ready? You know your groups, right?"

"Let me petition Iris," said Matt, to round out the third group. I got out my portable circle of petitioning, and he started praying. The groups were as follows:

Group 1, going to America: Dean, Elizabeth, and Christina.

Group 2, going to Germany: Dean, Yasui, and Osman.

Group 3, going to Hong Kong: Dean, Matt, and Iris.

Matt finished calling Iris, who was brought up to speed on the plan and given a bind ward to keep him here.

"Good luck," said Lucian as we stepped through.

ROBERT ZIEFEL

7

American Task

America still needs your help!

--The Avengers video game when you died

We appeared in what seemed to be a dusty old warehouse, but I knew it was warded to keep normal people out. I threw down the ward the principal had given me, and it activated, creating a glowing circle I could step through.

Odd that all these different powers produce circles of one kind or another. I wonder if there's something to that? I was musing on circles as we stepped through, then crouched down to see where we had landed. Elizabeth and Christina stepped through behind me.

"All clear," I whispered to them. We were about a half mile from the property, and the map showed some landmarks we would need to follow to make it to the road that led into the place. Getting to see who lived there and seeing if they had the egg- that was the tricky part.

"Want to ride in on Anthony?" asked Elizabeth.

"Won't that be a little obvious?" asked Christina.

"Nah," she replied. "She's unseen. Normal people won't even know she's there. And if we're riding her, they'll ignore us too."

"No, let's walk up to the front gate or door or whatever," I said. "I don't want to drop into this guy's lawn, and there's every chance he can see the unseen. Some otherwise normal people can." I was thinking back to that weird "library" we found the map piece in last year.

"They could have cameras along the road," Elizabeth agreed. "Better to let them see us coming, I guess. What's our story? We're a little old to be selling Girl Scout Cookies."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Yeah, and one of us isn’t a girl,” said Christina. “Come on, we’ll figure that out once we get near the place and see what the situation is.”

We walked along the road, taking in the scenery. I had to admit, the rich could pick nice places to live. Open spaces, beautiful sky, mountains in the distance; very picturesque. “Yeah,” I remarked, looking around, “I’ll have a place like this someday.”

Elizabeth snorted. “No you won’t.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. You want to be where the action is, I can tell. ‘Helping People Club’ I mean, come on, it’s obvious. You’ll either be some big shot consultant for the Foundation and travel the world like James Bond or take over the place and live at the super secret headquarters. You, living out here in the middle of nowhere like this? Not going to happen.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. And you’ll have your trusty friends at your side, ready to throw in with you no matter the odds.”

“That would be nice.”

“You should know, it just happened.”

“What?”

“Look around, Dean! I’ve seen the way Yasui looks at you, and Christina here tries to play it all ice maiden, but she didn’t bat an eye when you said you wanted to do this. She just signed up, no questions asked. Though, to be fair, so did I.”

“What are you saying?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m saying you’re the glue, Dean. You hold this group together. You can use all of our techniques, well, except the petitioners I mean, but that’s out of respect for the Heavens, not any inadequacy on your part. That means you know what it’s like to have our powers. What our strengths and weaknesses are, everything. Look at the way you put the teams together. I mean you went through the trouble of cloning yourself so you could watch over all of us. You put me with a long range fighter, so I could send Anthy out to engage something while Christina protected me. You put a close range fighter with Osman, who is not exactly helpless because of Kat, but anything that rushes him would have to get through her. Then Matt and his friend the magic using phoenix for party number three, and he can call other forces up easily because he has more spirit energy than Osman does. Three perfectly balanced teams, and all because you understand what we can do so well.”

"I guess it did work out that way, didn't it?"

"You don't have to be so modest. I know without you, there would have been no club. Yasui wouldn't hang out with Osman, and Christina here would probably be as sulky and emo as she pretends to be."

"I'm right here, you know?"

"But she's not. I've seen her crack a smile at your jokes sometimes. And of course I would be powerless, my inner demon off doing whatever. You're a third year student, Dean. What are you going to become when you're a grown up? I mean I haven't known you all that long, and I can see it. Am I right, or am I right, Christina?"

"You're probably right."

"I guess that's what Mr DeLefeu is wondering now. But I can't go back, I have to learn new things and move forward."

"As well you should," said Elizabeth. "I think it's great that-"

"Quiet!" hissed Christina, putting her hands on our shoulders and hauling us to the ground. "I think there are demons outside the gate!"

"What?" I hissed back, raising my head.

The road went down a small incline, putting the house at the bottom of a small hill. It was enormous, and from this angle you could see there was a nice pool out back, and a huge fence around the whole place. The road split off into a driveway, continuing the other way further into the countryside. As I looked, two inhuman shapes stood in front of the gate, holding large iron clubs. "Oni," I said angrily. "What are they doing here?"

"He did say the rich sometimes make deals with demons. Maybe they've come to collect?" asked Elizabeth.

"But they're guards, look. They aren't bashing the gates in or anything, they're just standing there."

"Wait, oni aren't unseen," I remarked. "Are we sure they're alive, and not just statues?" We watched a moment, and they definitely moved. "Okay, not statues. I mean, this road is pretty empty but what if someone drives by?"

"They probably would think they were just ugly statues in front of the gate," said Elizabeth. "What else could they be?"

"Still, this is not good," said Christina. "What do we do? attack?"

"I hate to kill things that are just doing their job," said Elizabeth. "I mean they aren't hurting anyone just standing there. Couldn't we go down there and ask them what they're doing, and fight them if they attack?"

"Risky," replied Christina. "If they're here, that means maybe a demon lord or some more powerful demon is inside at this very moment."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

They could be servants, or just guards on watch. We need to get in there and kill any demons we see. We'll have surprise on our side."

"I agree," I said. "Demons just casually standing there, out in the open? That can't be good. And think of it this way, Elizabeth. If they're summoned, they'll just go back home. And if they aren't, well, they shouldn't be here anyway. Though the Foundation might want to learn how they got here."

"I guess. Over the summer I read up on what I could about Foundation policies, and we're basically given permission to destroy any demons that are found on Earth. Sort of like how that guy was experimenting with the dulahan. They aren't human, so they don't fall under any human law, so whatever goes. I may not like it, but that is the official policy."

"The what?" asked Christina.

"I'll tell you later. How are we going to handle it?"

"Can you snipe one of them from here?" I asked Christina.

"Gladly," she said, shaking her spirit focus cross out of her sleeve. "They don't practice spirit sense, do they?"

"The books say most don't bother. They're pretty dimwitted," I told them. *And as all demons of a single type are basically carbon copies of each other I can say that with confidence.*

"But something in the house could!" protested Elizabeth.

"They'll know we're here soon enough. Okay, I'm going to power up, then snipe one. If you can get Anthy out, can you get the other?"

"Not to brag, but I'm confident Anthy could get both if she needed to. What's this about powering up?"

"You'll see," she answered with a smirk. "Come on, let's move back a little." We wiggled our way back up the road and Christina cautiously got up. "Okay, can't see the house from here. Hold on to your hair, freshman! I'm going all the way up," she said to me, "to hopefully knock out any cameras down there. Step back. Way back. Further back. Keep going. Now you're set."

"Wait, if you're going to do something special, let me get Anthy out first. I've been waiting for a chance to show you this, now seems like a good time."

"Whatever."

I activated my armor undershirt and regeneration talismans so I would be ready when the fight came, and watched what Elizabeth was going to do.

She concentrated, and Anthy appeared. "Okay, do whatever it is you're going to do."

I smiled, I knew what was coming. Christina was going to call upon her spirit grades and release her true potential. Her energy was going to skyrocket in a minute. What I didn't expect was Elizabeth to mimic her movement and start glowing with power herself. Before my unbelieving eyes even Anthy started radiating power, more it seemed than either of the two girls! As raw energy tore across the landscape, all three of their bodies started radiating power, glowing with an unearthly light. As I struggled to remain standing my spirit sense nearly tore my head off, as the very air around me seemed to warp and change. The amount of spirit energy now crackling in the air in this area was unmeasurable, as though an entire neighborhood's worth of energy had been gathered into one place. Elizabeth stood stunned, then started laughing hysterically. The ground started to tremor violently, as she lost total control of her spirit energy.

"That's what I'm talking about!" she yelled over the wind, shaking, and force that was trying to push me to the ground. I think the only reason I didn't go flying from all this was the fact that some of the force was canceling itself out. The three massive energies were pushing against each other. Also my mystical armor may have been countering some of it, as being thrown through the air would probably be considered an attack on my person.

"Come on, they must know we're here now!" she said, starting to run towards the house. Anthy followed, flying low to the ground. The force followed them, lessening some of the pressure on me but the grass I saw stayed bent down, as though something heavy had passed over it.

And the principal thinks I'm a monster? What did she do?

"Crap!" I shouted, realizing Christina was still just standing there, gaping at Elizabeth. "Cover her!"

"On it!" she shouted, shaking herself.

I could only imagine the two oni, now looking up the hill terrified, as a small girl bursting with power topped the rise. She gestured, and Anthy almost contemptuously blew them away with an enormous energy blast. The gate behind them tore out of its foundation, and where two brick pillars once stood was now a huge hole in the fence. Elizabeth marched on. "Come out, demons, and face me! Leave the poor person that lives here alone," she shouted.

I doubt they can hear you at that distance.

She continued to march forward, towards the house. Christina had an arrow ready and I slapped an ignore ward on myself from my pouch and went after her.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

As she neared the house the door flew open and three men in suits spilled out, chanting. They all threw some gems of various sizes to the ground, and three confused looking giants appeared.

Yes, giants.

I knew they were giants by the simple fact that they were nearly the size of the house that was behind them. One held a huge hoe, and was obviously in the middle of hoeing the ground because he swung and tore the ground up at his feet. The other two were woman, one with a large wooden spoon she was tasting something from, and the other was holding what looked like a stereotypical shepherd's staff, sized up for her. All three looked around.

"Kill them and you can have the gems," one of them shouted through cupped hands, while the others pointed at the thrown stones.

"What?" said the male, leaning down and putting an ear closer to the man.

Anthy wasted no time, she took to the air and conjured two enormous energy blasts from her front legs. I was glad she still had the presence of mind to direct them away from the humans, and energy slammed into the three giants, which knocked them back and made them roar in pain. They knew they were under attack now, I guessed.

The nearest one, the one with the staff, looked around for where the blast came from. She spied Anthy and took a giant step towards her, swinging the staff. Anthy easily dodged it.

"Leave her alone!" shouted Elizabeth, firing off an energy blast of her own. Even untrained as she claimed, she could hardly miss something that size, and the giant was again slammed with energy, both from her and from an arrow that streaked from Christina. She went down with a gaping hole in her chest, though you couldn't really tell when she crashed due to how badly the Earth was shaking already.

The other female giant bellowed with rage and charged towards Elizabeth, bringing her wooden spoon down with ferocity. Elizabeth just crossed her arms as a barrier sprang into existence around her. The spoon snapped off at the handle and went spinning away.

Giants are not too bright, so the one with the hoe tried the same thing, slamming the metal part of the hoe against Elizabeth's barrier. It too busted apart. She shrugged, as if asking them what else they had.

The female giant brought her arm back to punch it. Elizabeth made a “bring it on” gesture with her hand, but Christina shot another arrow at the giant, again hitting the chest. The giant tried to dodge, but couldn’t, and it burned away, howling in agony.

The third giant looked over at the one burning away, then at the one on the ground, and raised his arms.

“You want us to fight them?” he shouted. “Send me back before they kill me too! You can have your stupid gems!”

“Why, you ungrateful- Demon that now stands before me, begone because I banish thee!” The giant disappeared. “Come on, let’s try a dragon next!”

The other two nodded in agreement, and started chanting. One of them cut his hand with a knife he brought out from his pocket.

Christina put an arrow through the leg of the nearest one, who went down in a cry of pain. She must have been holding back, the leg didn’t explode, but he was still clutching it. “Don’t even think about it,” she said, drawing another arrow into existence and aiming it at the next one in line. “It’ll be a headshot next, and don’t think I can’t.”

They stopped chanting and put their hands up.

I ran past them, not that they could see me. Christina could, she was keyed to the ward when I made them, all my friends were.

I’ll need to add my new friends into that when I make some more.

“Keep them covered, I’ll check out the house. You guys can’t go in, you’ll bust the place up just by walking around. And try to calm Elizabeth down.”

“You got it,” she replied.

I entered the house and looked around. Various minor items which obviously were on pedestals before now lay smashed on the floor, victim of Elizabeth’s inadvertent Earth shaking. I passed several more oni, all arguing about who was going to go out and assist their masters, and moved through the house. I came to a room with an elderly gentleman shoving things from a safe into a bag in a big hurry.

I watched for a moment, then pulled out my sunlight knife. I tried doing a spirit sense on him, but the power in this area from outside was still wrecking havoc with my senses. I did manage an aura reading, and was unsurprised to find he was terrified, his aura being sharp and jagged. I figured if I kept him off balance enough he wouldn’t be able to try anything, and I could probably counter anything he did anyway. My talismans were still active, and I could have my acceleration or wind blast on in an instant, so I

wasn't too worried. I closed the door, making him look up, and pulled off the ignore ward.

He jumped.

"Don't hurt me!"

Okay, that isn't what I was expecting.

"I'm not going to hurt you. We're here to save you!"

"Save me? Are you nuts? Who are you?"

"I know you may find this hard to believe, but there were demons roaming around your house. Plus there were two outside. You're obviously under the influence of those summoners that came out, so we're here to help."

"Help?" the man screamed. "Help?! You idiot, those summoners work for me! The oni are my security force, to protect all my valuables!"

"Uh... what?"

"They work for beans, don't you know anything? I give them all the beans they can eat, they get away from Hell and get some honest work in. Everybody wins. I pay the summoners minimum wage, they just laze around all day. Why am I telling you this? Are you robbing me or not?"

I looked down at the knife in my hand. "No, I'm not. I thought you needed saving. Sorry!" I put it back in the pouch.

"I didn't, you stupid kid. Who's going to pay for all this damage? You think my insurance company is going to believe this?"

Suddenly the spirit energy I felt from outside cut off, along with the tremor, which could mean only one thing- Elizabeth had died!

"Stay here!" I ordered, wishing I had picked up compulsion. In his terrified state even I could have gotten through his mental defenses. I ran outside, past some oni, who shouted "Hey!" and pointed at me. I didn't hear them pounding after me, so I ran back through the halls and busted out of the place through the front door. To my relief Elizabeth was still outside, and Christina was bending over and healing the summoner she had wounded. The giant was gone, but in her place was a man I hadn't seen before, obviously yelling at Elizabeth.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, walking up to him. He had a thick beard, and a wide face. He was probably in his mid fifties, and was slightly overweight.

"Another one? How many more of you are there?" he demanded.

"This is all of us. Who are you?"

"I'm Fredric Baginski, from the Watchers. I was told to keep an eye on you kids, and I can see why. Your spirit projection could have wrecked that house! Of all the irresponsible, reckless, foolhardy--"

I turned away from him. “Are you okay, Elizabeth? He didn’t do anything to you, did he?”

Fredric gave a shocked gasp, obviously not used to being interrupted. But I figured he really didn’t have anything interesting to say anyway.

“I’m fine. He just came up behind me and started yelling at me to power down. Have you ever done that? It was absolutely fantastic! I, uh, may have gone a little crazy afterwards...”

“A little!” said Fredric. “Young lady you were out of control!”

“No, I wasn’t,” she protested. “You haven’t begun to see me out of control, not by a long shot. Anthy knew what she was doing, and she has pinpoint control of her energy blasts, I know that now.”

Fredric sputtered for a moment, then turned to me. “You must be Dean, so you’re in charge of this little operation? What exactly did you think you were doing?”

“I thought I was rescuing someone from demonic control. We messed up,” I said to Elizabeth. “The demons were there legitimately, if such a thing can be possible.”

“What?”

“I know, tell me about it.”

“At least you were somewhat well intentioned.”

The owner of the house, now somewhat bolder after I had run off, had gathered his remaining Oni and come out the door.

“My vases, smashed!” he shouted. “My artwork, destroyed! And what happened to my gate? You’re going to pay for this, all of you! I’m calling the cops!”

He pulled out a cell phone, but as he stabbed the keys it was obvious it wasn’t working. I doubted anything electronic was working anywhere in this area. Luckily my own cell phone was safely snug in my pocket dimension.

“Now, now, there’s no need for that,” said Fredric. “I’m sure we can work something out.”

“And who are you?” demanded the man. “Are you in charge here? You’ll be hearing from my lawyer!”

“Yes, good luck convincing him a fourteen year old girl smashed down your gate with an energy blast.”

“I- That is- This is- And you!” he whirled on the three summoners, now all healthy again. “You couldn’t stop two little girls? What am I paying you for? What if someone really was here to rob me?”

“I doubt there are three people in the world who could do what they did,” said one of them. “You can’t feel it, but she warped ley lines in this

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

area for miles. They still aren't right. I don't know how she got that much energy, but it's more than even major demon lords. A lot more, like major super powerful angel level."

"Really?" asked Elizabeth excitedly. "Wicked!"

"How did you do that?" asked Christina. "I put a lot of effort into learning that skill."

"Is it something I can learn on my own? I never heard about it in class. Is it a secret technique or something? Can you teach me?"

"No!" said Christina with finality. She softened. "It's something you have to be born with anyway. At least, so I thought."

Elizabeth laughed. "Surprise! I never told you guys, but I have another power. It's kind of like with Dean. You know how his soul can attune itself to using spirit energy in different ways, but only a little?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, so can mine, but in a different way. I can hook into any power going on around me and perform that same thing myself. It's come in handy a time or two."

"And you chose my spirit grades, but how were you so much more powerful?"

"I don't know. Everyone keeps saying how much energy I have, plus my whole ground shaking thing, maybe that has something to do with it."

"All this is very interesting," said the owner, sarcastically. "But it doesn't address the issue of who is going to pay for all of this!"

"We caused the problem, we'll put it to rights," I said. "It's only fair."

"Ha! You can put my vases and things back together? Repair my TV? What about my cell phone?"

"I can't, but I know who can. My parents. I can get them here. I'll head back to the island, get them to come, and we'll have this done by lunch time."

"You better!" said the man.

"I'll be right back."

My parents, after having a laugh at what we had done, agreed to come fix the place up. My mother grabbed her own portable circle of repair, and I showed her the picture of the house we needed to go to. Christina and I fed my father energy as he used his alchemy skills to repair all the art in the house, and then the gate. Elizabeth was able to help on the gate, she did the right side as he did the left. They needed some raw material to turn into the metal and bricks, but the owner of the house was able to

supply an old beat up car he said was worthless, and they tore chunks off it and reshaped them, making the gate again.

The man seemed impressed despite himself.

In the end, even he admitted everything was back in place and working, so he would forget the whole thing. He even asked why we had come there in the first place, and I told him about the phoenix egg. He said he didn't know anything about an object matching that description, he dealt manly in weapons and armor that no longer could be passed down through families because they had died out. He showed us, and he had quite a collection of talismans that were now bound up in a family lineage and so couldn't be used by anyone else. He seemed nice enough, now that we weren't attacking his place, and we again apologized for trashing it like we did.

"If you find anything else that isn't working that I missed," my mother said, handing him a business card, "just email me and I'll come take care of it."

"Thank you," said the man gruffly. "I'll keep it in mind. Uh, out of curiosity, if I found an antique object and needed it repaired, could I call upon your services? I would pay you of course!" he hastily added. We left them with my father haggling over rates and exactly what he could do for the man.

Once back at the island and I allowed myself to flow back into my clone counterparts, my part in this completed.

Germany Task

*Shall retain in the world
Their old beautiful chime
And inspire us to noble deeds
-- From the German National anthem*

The sun was much lower in the sky as we peaked out of the teleport point in Germany. I passed out two communication wards to Yasui and Osman, and all three of us put them on under our clothes. Yasui also got out two extra ones, that she affixed to her boots. We could still see them, but I recognized the standard unseen wards given to inheritors with things to hide when they went out in the world. We seemed to be in a back alley behind a row of shops, all with no space between them.

“I guess this is Germany,” I announced. “Wait, I see a German sign, that’s going to be a problem, our communication wards won’t handle that.”

“Kat says if I touch a sign she might be able to use her powers to tell us what it means. The general meaning, anyway.”

“Ah, a skill I can’t learn. Thanks Kat, I’ll keep it in mind. Are we ready to go?” I held out the ward that was going to get us closer to our target. Osman and Yasui nodded, so I tossed it and stepped through.

We arrived in a nice neighborhood, with a cool breeze blowing and clouds drifting lazily overhead. The trees were starting to turn, but most were still green. We were concealed under a small bridge that spanned a small stream, and as the coast was clear we walked up the bank to the road. There was an intersection not far down the road, so we headed in that direction.

“Pity we don’t have time to actually look around all these places we get whisked to,” remarked Osman, looking about. “Even on field trips it seems we only scratch the surface of a place before it’s on to the next thing.”

“Just think, I’ve seen all these places, I can always bring us back here. Maybe after we graduate we’ll take a year off and just travel. The four of us, backpacking around the world. With all our powers it would be doable. Heck, don’t people without powers do it?”

“That would be nice.”

“It sure would,” agreed Yasui. “Now, maybe Kat can read that street sign over there so we can figure out where we are on this map.”

But it was just the name of the street, so we matched it up with the map and tried to figure out which way to go. A jogger passed us.

“You kids lost?” he asked.

“Ah, we’re trying to find...” and I gave him the address.

“Oh, want to see the destruction for yourselves? It was pretty nasty, but they’ve got it mostly cleaned up now. Still, go down there and take the second left. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks!” and added, “Oh, do you have the time?”

“About three,” he said, looking at his watch, and he jogged on.

Ah, six hours ahead of us.

“Destruction?” asked Osman.

“That doesn’t sound promising,” said Yasui.

“Come on,” I said.

We walked where the jogger had indicated, and there was the house. The windows were boarded up, and there were scorch marks on the lawn and on the house itself. Several of the green shutters had been pulled off the windows, and even a few of the red roof tiles were missing. We walked up the driveway, looking at the destruction. There was a marble statue of a “cherub” that was knocked over, and looking closer, what looked like motorcycle tracks criss crossing the lawn. We came to a stop in front of the house and looked up at it.

“What happened here?” asked Osman, concerned. “Something hit this place hard.”

“Want to knock on the door and ask?” Yasui teased.

“Better not,” I suggested. “Let’s take a look around the back.”

The back was much the same, but less cleaned up. It seemed the windows here that were broken, and boarded up, were broken from the inside

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

rather than the outside. Glass crunched underfoot as we made our way around. There was a blank space next to one window where what must have been a gang sign had been spray painted. A series of three doors led back inside, but all were boarded up now.

“Can’t even tell if someone’s inside- Oh, Kat says there is,” Osman told us.

“Great. Now what? Wait until they leave?” asked Yasui.

“No, I think I’m going to change my mind about knocking,” I said, gesturing them to follow me. We went back around to the front and I rang the doorbell, which I was pretty sure didn’t work. I waited a moment to be sure no one came, then politely knocked.

A moment later someone came running and the door flew open. “Jan?” cried a 20 something girl standing there. “Oh. Can I help you?” The girl was just a regular German girl. Blond hair that hung down past her shoulders, slight of frame, and only a little taller than I was.

“Sorry if you were expecting someone else,” I said. “I know this is probably the worst possible time, but is the owner of the house in?”

The girl seemed to deflate a bit. “My father died in the attack three days ago.”

Yasui gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. Osman just shook his head, looking down sadly. “I am very sorry for your loss,” I said sincerely. “I know it’s not much comfort, but if he was a good man you can be assured he is in a far better place.”

The girl looked at me strangely. “I’ve heard that more times than I could count these last few days, but you’re the first person to actually say it as though they really believed it.” She shook her head. “Anyway, were you here to pick something up? My father apparently bought and sold stuff all the time, so you aren’t the first to come expecting to see him. Please, come inside.” She held the door open for us, and we walked in. “Sorry about the mess. There’s just been so much to...” She broke off, then took a deep breath. “Come have a seat. A lot of things were stolen, but maybe what you’re after is still here.”

She led us into a sitting room that was all smashed up, but the couch was still mostly intact, so we all sat down. The lights were on, as not much light was coming in through the boarded up windows. The place seemed dark and angry, though that may have been my ESP reacting to whatever happened here.

“I’m Dean,” I said, introducing myself. “These are Yasui and Osman.”

"I'm pleased. My name is Sophie Eisenberg, I'm Jonas' daughter."

"Nice to meet you."

Sophie looked at me a little strangely, and I realized she had used a slightly different greeting phrase than we in the US did. My ward might translate the words, but if they used different phrases, it wouldn't compensate for that. "Sorry, German isn't my first language."

"You speak it very well..." Sophie replied, though looked thoughtful, as if coming to the realization she wasn't exactly hearing German after all. I decided to press on before she figured something was up. "We are here to pick something up, but your father wouldn't have known we were coming. We represent a... special interest group looking to track down a certain antique egg. Your father's name was given to us along with several others that had an interest in the type of thing it represented." *Man, what is my translation ward going to make of that sentence?*

But Sophie seemed unconcerned. "My father seems to have been active in collecting and trading many things. Given the number of packages that have arrived, and the phone calls wanting to speak to him about prior sales. It's been a nightmare, his being killed like he was."

"If I may ask, what happened?"

"You know about the biker gangs that have been hanging around the city lately?"

I, of course, knew of no such thing. But I knew about gangs, and I knew about bikers. And while my grades in math were only mediocre, I could put one and one together and get two.

"They are a real problem," I agreed.

"My father was very outspoken about them needing to be run off by the police," she went on. "He was always writing to the paper or posting to the internet about it. Probably he feared having the nicest house on the block he would eventually become a target."

"And as he feared, he did become one," I finished, sadly.

Sophie nodded. "I don't know if it was in retaliation for what he had been saying, or just they were bored. But three nights ago--"

She was interrupted by a cell phone ringing, and she hastily got it out of her pocket. I noticed her hands were shaking, and she looked at the screen. "Oh, it's a friend, I'll just be a second."

She stood and moved off to the side of the room.

"Hi Karla. No word yet. Of course he's in trouble, you think he would stay away this long if he wasn't? Ransom note? Why would they mail it, one of them would just deliver it. Anyway they got what they

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

wanted, and no one can prove anything. Yes, I'll go check the mail now. Yes, I'll call you if he turns up. I have some people here, I have to go. Goodbye."

She came back to us.

"I'm sorry about that." She seemed on the verge of tears now, and I took her hand and guided her to the seat again.

"There's something else, isn't there?" I asked gently.

"It's my fiancé, he's been missing since the attack. I suspect he was here talking to my father and they took him."

Yasui, Osman and I traded glances.

"I mean, my father they just left, lying there where they shot him. But my fiancé is missing. What else could it be?" She started crying. "I'm sorry, I just..." she got up again and ran out of the room.

"Looks like we have a rescue mission," said Yasui.

"But to take on a biker gang? We would need to use powers," Osman protested quietly. "And you know the Foundation frowns on that sort of thing. Especially for something as mundane as a kidnapping."

"Yeah, Yasui, unless there was a demon or some other paranormal agent at work here-" She glared at me. "I'm not saying we just turn our back on this poor girl!" I held up my hands in surrender. "I'm just saying we're going to have to be very careful in what we do."

"You think I couldn't take on a biker gang using just my martial arts skills, Dean? I wouldn't need to do anything flashy just to take out some regular humans."

"I guess. Osman, do you know anything unseen that could help us out? And my beaver could also wreck up someplace and they wouldn't know what was going on."

"Just one," answered Osman. "A baku."

"That's the thing the note said tore the head off that progenitor, right? That's ideal, as long as we have him hold back."

"I could ask."

"We would have to find them, first," said Yasui.

"Don't worry, gangs in any country probably don't go out of their way to hide."

Sophie came back in the room, looking a little calmer now. "I'm sorry about my outburst. What was it you wanted to discuss?"

"An egg your father might have had, or knew who did. It would be rather unlike any egg you've ever seen. The title of the work was "The Phoenix Egg" so you would know it to see it. It might have even seemed a little warm to the touch. Does that ring any bells?"

She shook her head. "I didn't see much of his collection. After he moved here we kept in touch but I didn't come out to see him very much. Not nearly enough, and now he's gone. Anyway, his computer might have those records, but it too was a little smashed up. If you can get it working again you can take a look."

"I'll see what I can do," volunteered Osman.

Didn't know he knew anything about computer repair...

He doesn't, but the angel he was supposed to have did, Kat sent to me. Just because they don't use computers in Heaven doesn't mean they don't keep up with human advancement. Especially where angels of knowledge are concerned.

She took us over to his study and Osman poked around inside the machine, getting it running. Meanwhile Yasui and I were invited to look around, see if we spotted the egg anywhere.

Of course we didn't.

Osman reported success in getting the computer up and running, and found the man's database of what he owned.

"He was always a good record keeper," said Sophie sadly. "This will really help, now I can make the insurance claim, and get things to the people who bought them. Thanks a lot."

"Glad I could help," said Osman. He paged through the records and there it was- a brilliantly colored scarlet egg. It was hard to tell the scale from the picture, but it seemed pretty large.

"I guess you were right, there's nothing I would call that but a phoenix egg," said Sophie. "But where is it? Don't tell me it was stolen?!"

We searched around, poking in boxes and looking underneath everything to make sure it hadn't rolled away. Kat even helped, both by separating from Osman and trying ESP to find it. Osman scanned the place with his special vision, but about two hours later we decided it was time to give up. Yasui was itching to leave and track down the bikers, but we couldn't without arousing her suspicions.

After all, a group of three kids saying 'well, better go rescue your boyfriend single handedly from an unknown number of bikers with guns and knives' would have made us seem insane. It probably was an insane plan anyway.

"I'm sorry," said Sophie at last, "but it seems like it's gone."

"That does seem to be the case," I admitted. "Still, I'm sure the local police will have everything, even your boyfriend, back safely by tomorrow."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

She snorted. “Hardly likely. But thank you for the sentiment.”

“Don’t brush it off, miracles happen every day.”

She laughed a little. “If my boyfriend is back unharmed I’ll be in church every Sunday, thanking the Lord on my knees.”

And He would ignore you, like He ignores everyone. But I get what she’s saying.

“Don’t forget, you promised,” said Osman, as we took our leave. “Every Sunday.”

I left my email address with her, “in case the egg was recovered,” but really because not doing so would again be suspicious. She gave us her number too, in case the “special interest group” wanted to talk to her directly. We walked back the way we came.

“She was nice,” said Osman. “Too bad about her father, though.”

“We always realize too late what we’ll miss when it’s gone,” I said.

“True.”

“Yeah, yeah, payback time,” insisted Yasui. “How are we going to find this biker gang?”

“Already on it,” said Osman. “We’re meeting Kat back at the first road sign we saw. She’s zipping around the city now looking for a bunch of bikers and that symbol we saw painted on the wall.”

“Oh.”

Moments after we got back to the sign, Osman perked up again.

“She found them. About five miles that way. There’s a guy chained up in the basement, and about twenty guys inside a bar.”

“Is that all?” Yasui snorted. “No problem.”

Osman looked unconvinced.

“With our resources, and time to prepare, it shouldn’t be,” I said. “Remember, I can provide you a couple of wards, like unseen and acceleration. Even you could take them out, Osman. Kat using her powers won’t break the unseen, so you could just stand there and have her go at it.”

“But using powers like that—” he protested.

“ESPer powers don’t leave a trace, you know that. It won’t be anything visible. The only thing visible will be a sixteen year old girl beating the crap out of a bunch of bikers. Nothing supernatural about that.”

“Except for the fact she’ll be moving way faster than a normal person could... oh, all right, don’t look at me that way, Yasui. Let me petition a couple of baku, we’ll have to ride over there. I’m not going to walk five miles.”

So we made our preparations. I stuck acceleration wards on myself and my friends, and activated my armor talisman. I also slapped an ignore ward on Osman and myself. All these wards were going to start interfering with each other, but three wasn't bad, and I put extra energy into their activation to compensate. Meanwhile, standing on my circle of petitioning, Osman easily called two baku and explained the situation. They knelt down, obviously allowing us to ride.

"Thank you," I said, approaching it. "I've got a ward to put on you, so you can stick around without drawing energy from Osman all the time. Is that okay?"

They looked to him, who nodded.

Turning to the side, they allowed me to slap the ward on. Then they crouched and we climbed on their backs. "I appreciate this. I know it's a little outside your purview, but a rescue mission *is* a rescue mission."

He nodded, and we were off. As we neared the place I readied my regeneration talisman, and activated the talisman that allowed me to more easily call my beaver out, which I did. I felt the spiritual drag of maintaining my two clones, but I didn't believe I would be participating much in this battle directly. All these precautions were just that, precautions, in case my ward got ripped off or I needed to intervene.

Yasui, seemingly alone, barged into the biker bar, and conversation stopped. In reality, she was backed up by me, my beaver, Osman, Kat, and two baku. They didn't stand a chance.

I realized how absurd it was from their point of view. A little girl, obviously Asian in heritage, walking into a German pub with twenty motorcycles parked outside. She was slightly blurry and twitchy from the acceleration ward, but that couldn't be helped. She didn't have on her school uniform, but her clothes were obviously foreign. One of the bikers came up to her.

"You lost, little one?" he said. "Or you just looking for a good time? Because we can show you a really good time." All the others laughed.

Yasui stood her ground. "The man you have tied up in your basement. I want him and the egg one of you stole last night, returned immediately. Do that, and all of you walk out of here tonight under your own power."

There was a moment of silence, then raucous laughter.

"Okay," said another person. "Who put her up to this? Leon, man, was that you?"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Not me!” shouted another.

“Who was it? Come on, fess up, this is great!”

As the room was carrying on, Yasui picked up a bottle and threw it in the air. Then she did a roundhouse kick that smashed it to pieces. The room got quiet again.

Hey, I just thought of something! Those wards she's wearing on the boots to make them unseen, right? She's not wearing shoes or anything, so to these guys it looks like she's barefoot and barelegged. They don't know she's dragging around eight pounds of spiritually enhanced steel on her legs.

“Look little girl,” said the original speaker, coming right up to Yasui, “you better leave here before you get hurt.”

She didn't waste words, she jumped lightly to one side and slammed her foot sideways against his knee. He screamed and went down, clutching it.

The room erupted, everyone jumping up and grabbing guns, knives, chairs, whatever came to hand. Someone yelled “Get her!” and they charged.

Yasui smiled.

Two of the bikers reached her at the same time, and she grabbed the bar and swung her legs up, lashing out with both legs as one raised a chair to smash over her head, while the other lunged with a knife. She hit them both, one in the head who went down like a cloth doll, and the other in the body, which just staggered him. She used her momentum to hop up on the bar, giving her a good view of the room.

Two of the bikers got tangled up both trying to occupy the same space as they ran around their table, so they were no threat at the moment. I sent my beaver to intercept one of the gunman who was aiming at Yasui and about to pull the trigger, while the other had his arm bitten by one of the baku. However, the one that I sent my beaver towards suddenly cried out in pain, blood spurting out from his wrist. He dropped the gun.

Yasui aimed two kicks at the next two guys that ran up, trying to grab her off the bar. Her stronger leg took down the guy to the right, while the guy to the left just staggered back, wounded.

This pattern seemed to repeat a few times, with the baku and my beaver running interference, and Yasui taking down at least one person for every two that attacked her. There was also the occasional help from Kat who tripped people up or caused damage directly with cohesion. Yasui stayed on the bar, which was a good strategic move, as it prevented anyone from getting behind her or to the sides. She even used spirit step a time or

two, further confusing them, and forced them to run into each other as they changed directions to try and grab her.

Soon the room was filled with a chorus of groans, as those that were not knocked out were trying to crawl away. Only our group was standing, and as we were all but invisible and no one had laid so much as a finger on Yasui, she didn't have a scratch.

"I'll ask again," Yasui said, walking over to the one she ruined the knee of right off. "Where is the egg?"

"Go to Hell!" he spat.

"Been. Killed some demons. Came back. Where's the egg?" She stepped on his knee, causing him to scream.

"It got sold. Tim took it to the pawn shop down the street. I told him it would be too hot, but he said he needed the cash. I swear!"

"I hope you're telling the truth. I would hate to have to track you down and ask again." She let up on his knee, but kicked him in the head, knocking him out as well.

"Dean, want to have your beaver heal this guy?" she whispered to me. "I don't want to cripple him, really."

I would have anyway. "Sure thing."

"And to the rest of you, I want you to leave town. Don't ever come back here, because if you do, I'll be waiting. You understand?"

Those still conscious just shrank back.

I had my beaver heal his knee, and we went through the door at the back and down a set of stairs. There, in a dingy basement, was an unconscious young man. He was hanging by a chain, tied to his hands, from a hook in the ceiling.

"At least he's still alive," said Osman. "But he's in bad shape."

Looking him over, I saw he had cuts and bruises all over his body. Probably the gang members having a "bit of fun." My beaver came forward and started healing him, while I touched the chain and willed it to separate. I felt that spiritual drag again, but all I wanted was a paper thin section of the chain to pull away from itself, so I managed it. He slumped down, supported by Osman and Yasui.

"Kat is also going to use healing acceleration on him," said Osman. "So he should be up and around in no time."

"That carnage out there is pretty severe." said a voice. We spun, and there was a middle aged woman standing there. She held out her hands. "Peace, I'm with the Foundation. Holy chosen."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Osman bowed.

She acted like she didn't see him, which was of course the case if he was still wearing the ward. "I noticed you holding back out there," she said to Yasui. "You even healed the leg of that one. Well, you asked for it to be healed. Not sure where the beaver came from... are you a shaman as well?"

Yasui shook her head. "There are a couple of others here, wearing ignore wards."

"I see. Then after beating them up, you came and saved this poor soul. I'm sure you could have killed all those men instead, especially the ones you had already knocked out. Why didn't you?"

"Not my place," said Yasui. "They've made some bad choices in their lives, maybe, but they should be given the opportunity to correct those choices, if they want."

"I see the quality of education hasn't gone down in recent years. Glad to hear it. And you didn't do much that couldn't be explained by too much booze, for which I thank you. I don't even think an ESPer to change their memories will be needed."

"We tried to make sure of that."

"We need to get after that egg," I said to Yasui. "Ask her if she can take it from here."

"My invisible companion is anxious to get after the stolen property, the real reason we came here," said Yasui. "Can you see this man gets the help he needs?"

"Of course. You would have a tough time explaining yourself to the German police, so I'll take care of it through back channels. He'll be well cared for."

"He needs to be returned to a certain young lady that's worried about him," she added, and gave the address.

"Every Sunday."

"My other invisible companion says if you meet her, remind her she said every Sunday!"

The woman laughed. "Very well, I think I know what you mean. Now, I think there's a back door to this place, let's make sure no one sees you leave."

After we left we pulled off our wards and watched them burn away. Osman thanked his two baku companions and they nodded. He moved to dismiss them, but I grabbed his hand.

"We don't know how far away this pawn shop is," I cautioned. "We may need their help getting there. If you two don't mind?"

They bent down again, indicating they didn't, and we climbed atop them again. By this time it was starting to get dark, but we sent Kat to scout the area and see if there were any shops that fit the description "nearby." When she returned she said there was, and guided us in. It was still open, and we went inside.

"Hello," said the man behind the counter. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for an egg," I said. "It was part of the collection owned by that unfortunate man who was killed several days back."

"Oh, you're kidding me?"

"I'm afraid not. You've seen it then?"

"Maybe. You have a picture?"

"I can get you one," I replied. But he was doing something odd, bending forward as if I was showing him something.

"Yeah, that's the one that was brought in," he said. He slammed a fist down on the counter. "I knew I shouldn't have given that guy money for it. But I didn't want to risk my place being torched, you know what I mean?"

"Those biker gangs mean business sometimes, I don't blame you," I said, a little puzzled. "You still have it?"

"Of course. Law says I have to keep it a certain amount of time. Which I'm sure you know. Be right back."

He disappeared into the door behind the counter and we heard him rummaging around. I looked at Yasui and Osman but they looked like they didn't know what was going on any better than I did. The man came back out cradling the egg.

"Perfect," I said, "Ms Eisenberg will be happy to have it back. They didn't happen to sell you anything else, did they?"

"No, just this." He set the egg down on the counter. "Just a second, I've got the form you'll need to sign for my insurance claim." He bent down and slid open a filing cabinet drawer. He rummaged for a moment, muttering to himself, then pulled out a piece of paper. "Here we are. You don't mind if I make a copy of the picture, do you?"

"What picture? What are you talking about?" But the man was reaching forward.

"I can keep this one? Thanks! Now, let's see, pen, pen. Okay, iridescent art piece, about so high, no markings, paid so much, that should do it." He stapled something invisible to the paper and slid it around, miming handing me the pen. "Just need your signature and badge number, and it's all yours."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Badge number? What are you talking about? Hello?” I was waving my hand in front of his eyes, but he was looking at the paper.

“That’s it then,” he said. He took the still blank paper, filed it, and handed me the egg.

“Nice to see you actually out tracking things down, no offense intended.”

“We get that a lot,” I said, now just accepting something bizarre was going on. “Thanks for your cooperation in this matter.”

“Of course, of course. Have a good evening!”

“You too,” I said, shoving the egg in my pouch. He didn’t notice it being swallowed up as he had turned away, waving without looking. We left.

“Okay, what just happened?” asked Yasui.

“I think someone was doing something clever,” I replied. “Kat?”

A figure shimmered into being before us. “It was just a little bit of illusion, to help get the egg back. You think he would have just handed it over to a couple of kids?”

I sighed. “Probably not. So he saw me as a police officer, then?”

“Yup!”

“But that’s wrong,” said Osman. “He won’t actually have the picture or the signature or anything!”

“But he won’t have trouble with that biker gang anymore either, so I think that’s a fair trade.”

“Still, you should have asked us. I don’t like being deceitful like that.”

“Oh, Osman. We’re deceitful every day we walk around a place like this. We have *powers*, brother mine. Should we shout that fact at every person we meet? Demonstrate, perhaps?”

“Of course not!”

“Then it’s a lie by omission, isn’t it? They think we’re just like them. We’re not. What am I learning all this stuff for, and riding around in your head, if I can’t use them to help us? That guy wasn’t going to tell us anything- but he’ll talk to the cops. So cops we became, simple as that. We needed the egg, we got the egg. I’m sorry if I broke some little personal code of yours. He’s none the wiser, we have the egg, the bad guys got punished. That seems like a pretty good deal to me.” She turned to me. “You approve, right?”

“I have to admit, it was some quick thinking on your part. I wouldn’t have even considered it, but then, you have a point. I’m used to people giving me what I want because they know who I am. Or what I can do. Not so here, and that man had no incentive whatsoever to help us in the least. It was a little dishonest, but he was the one who bought something he figured was stolen. I’m not mad about it, and I don’t think you should be either, Osman.”

“Well, that’s something, anyway,” she said, vanishing again.

“Look,” I said to Osman, “she doesn’t get to do anything on her own. She saw a chance to really help us out, and she took it. I mean it can’t be easy for her, we need to see things from her point of view.”

“I know that, it’s just my original angel wouldn’t have done something like that. I must hold her to that standard.”

“I guess you have to do what you think is right. But you’re stuck with her, so getting mad at her won’t solve anything. Just keep that in mind.”

We walked for a moment, Osman either thinking about things or talking to Kat mentally. The baku padded along silently by our side.

“So, now what? Just head back home?” asked Yasui.

I shook my head. “No, now we return Sophie’s property. We tracked it down. Maybe the Foundation can strike a deal with the phoenixes and make her an offer for it. But I won’t steal it for them, not even to learn magic.”

“I guess just taking it at this point would be stealing,” agreed Yasui. “Well, up for one more trip, fellows?” she asked the baku. They bent down again.

As we rode I sensed it out. It was spiritually active, and soul appraising gave me a very odd result, but there was no doubt it wasn’t just an art piece. I also gave ESP a go, getting a “waiting” feeling from the egg, and my analysis skill told me it wasn’t any normal material. That was about the extent of my analytical skills, as I hadn’t yet learned how to sense magic, but I figured it was enough. This was the real deal!

“You really found it in the pawn shop just a couple of miles from here?” Sophie said, staring at the egg.

“That’s right,” I replied, a little longingly.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Thank you for bringing it back. How you managed that I’ll never know. What can I do to repay you?”

Hand it over for free. “Give my employer a good deal on it when he contacts you to buy it.”

“That sounds fair. When do you think-” Her cell phone rang again. “Oh, excuse me. Normally I wouldn’t but it could be news about...”

“Go ahead.”

“Hello? Yes, speaking. What? Really? Where? What room? Let me get a pencil. I must have something to write with around here.”

We looked at each other and smiled. Sophie was tearing a desk up looking for something to write with.

“Okay. Room 312. Yes, I know where it is. Thank you. Thank you so much for calling me! I’ll be down just as quick as I can.”

“Good news?” Yasui asked slyly.

“He’s been found! Apparently someone found Jan in the basement of a bar. And get this, someone beat up the gang! It must have been a rival gang, the place was all torn up.”

“You need to get going then!” I said. “We’ll get out of your hair. He’s okay, right?”

“He’s fine, it is a miracle, like you said. He’s in the hospital and he just woke up. He’s asking for me. Why there isn’t a scratch on him after being held captive for three days I’ll never know. Huh, I keep saying that. Who are you kids?”

“Come on,” I said to the others, after flashing a smile at Sophie. “Let’s let Sophie get going. We’ll be in touch.”

She shook her head. “Of course. Purse, I need my purse!”

We left, with Sophie madly dashing around for stuff in the house.

“Now we wait until she leaves, *then* we steal it back,” I said.

“What?” asked Yasui and Osman as one, eyes bugging out of their heads.

“Well, the pawn shop owner knows someone came to take it, and the police would be blamed in this case. That would cause even more problems here. But now that it’s back in the house and we’ve left...” I looked over at my friends, who were staring at me like I had just become a zombie or something. I laughed. “I’m only joking. Come on, let’s go home.” *Gatcha good though, didn't I? Must... Not... Giggle... Uncontrollably.*

Hong Kong Task

*What would any parent or grandparent
do to keep their own safe?*

We appeared in Hong Kong atop a building, and looked over the edge at the city that was lit up below us. The sun was not to be seen, but the amount of light that could be seen below totally compensated for it.

“Seems like I’m playing Sim City from up here,” remarked Matt.

“Yeah, and you’ve been playing for way too long. This place is just one giant city.”

And it was true. As far as I could see, buildings and more buildings in every direction.

“We may have to come back, it may be too late here to do anything.”

“I agree. We should have figured out the time difference before now. But at the same time I hate to go back so soon. We could at least find where the place is we’re going.”

“I guess. What about Iris, though?”

“Not to worry,” I said, pulling out a blank ward, “I’ve got that covered.” I spent several minutes penning a new ignore ward, keying it so we could all see each other. Putting it on him I said, “now you can enjoy being invisible, as well.”

“Thanks,” he said. “This place sure is hollow, isn’t it? They’re trying to approach the splendor of Heaven, but they haven’t even come close.”

“I think they’re just trying to make use of what little space they have,” I remarked. “And the lights are just no one covering their windows at night. Come on. Oh, better not forget these!”

I stuck the communication wards on us, and threw down the teleport one. We stepped through the secondary circle and found ourselves in a

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

parking garage, underground. We were in an out of the way, dark corner, making me wonder how Mr DeLefeu had chosen this particular spot for the anchor point.

“Elevator?” asked Matt.

“Maybe this way?” I replied, pointing.

We got turned around, and Iris was trying to keep up, so I was relieved to finally find an elevator that went up.

“Okay, we need the thirty second floor,” I said. “Room 3210. Watch your tail, everyone.”

We went up about 10 floors and had a woman get on. She looked at us really strangely, as we were obviously not from around here. Iris was pressed up against the wall, inches from where the woman was standing, and I noticed she was stepping on his tail. She rode up to the 28th floor and got off, and we nodded “goodnight” to her. She seemed relieved to get off.

“Ow,” said Iris, fanning his tail.

“Are you okay?” asked Matt.

“I regenerate, I’ll live.”

“Sorry to put you through that.”

“All in the name of the cause, I suppose. It’s not a problem.”

We got up to the 32nd floor, and went to room 3210.

“Now what?” hissed Matt.

“I guess we just knock and see if they’re up. There’s a light on in the room,” I said, pointing to the crack under the door.

“What? Just hey, do you have the phoenix egg?”

“I don’t know, something will come to me.”

“Something like what?”

Suddenly, from opposite ends of the hallway, doors burst open and men with guns poured out. They jumped both of us and forced us to the ground. The door to room 3210 opened and an elderly man stepped out, flanked by two more people with guns.

“They’re just kids,” he said. “You jumped a couple of kids? Let them up, they’re no danger.”

“With respect sir, how did two foreigners get here, and what where they doing outside your door? It’s all very suspicious.”

“Well let’s ask them and find out, shall we? I don’t think you’re scared of two young boys, are you?”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Iris, again pressed up against the wall and out of the way. At least no one was stepping on him this time. We were roughly stood up again, and marched into the room. The men in the

corridor vanished behind the doors down the hallway, and the two inside this room frisked us.

“They’re clean,” they announced.

Ha, shows what you know.

I had a chance to look around the room, which was large. I wondered if this guy didn’t own the entire floor of this building, which would explain why the woman looked at us so funny for coming to this floor. Various relics, from around the world, hung on walls or sat in locked cases. The carpet was a plush red, and a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling.

“Now, perhaps we can act like civilized people? Please, have a seat. Your being here is no accident, I’m sure.”

“You certainly have good security here,” said Matt, sitting down.

“Oh, they aren’t security,” the man said. “They’re just the local police force who are here until the kidnappers make contact again. My name is Zhou Rong-Bo.”

He was well dressed, with glasses, and probably average height for someone who was of Asian descent. He had a small, well trimmed beard, and graying hair.

“I’m Dean, and this is Matt.”

“Well, just Dean and just Matt, what brings you to Hong Kong?”

“We’re looking for something. Your name was given to us as someone who might know where we can start looking. It’s an antique that was described to me as being a phoenix egg.”

Zhou laughed. “I don’t think they have genders, and they certainly don’t lay eggs.”

Matt and I looked at each other and I did a spirit sense on the guy. He felt perfectly normal. “Be that as it may,” I said. “This... person believes it exists. And he sent me to you.”

“Did he now? I don’t suppose he has a name?”

I considered. “His name is Bennu.” He leaned back in his hear and folded his arms, looking at me intently. “You know that name?” I asked at last.

“It’s not one I’ve heard in many years, but yes, if it’s the one I’m thinking of, it’s not surprising he sent you after a phoenix egg. Curious. Well, I have to disappoint you, I’m afraid. I haven’t heard of anything that would go by that description.”

“That’s too bad. We won’t take up anymore of your time then.”

“Wait a second, Dean,” said Matt. “Sir, did you say something about a kidnapping?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Yes, my grandson,” he replied. “We’ve received a note from a triad cell in the area, demanding something of mine to get him back. How they even knew I had it is beyond me, but it does cause me some distress. On the one hand I wish my grandson home safely, but on the other, how can I let this item fall into their hands? What would you suggest?”

“That depends on what they want, I suppose. I saw a TV show where some terrorists wanted a certain type of nuclear detonator, so the good guys made them a fake one. It would stand up to whatever tests they did in the field, but would have ultimately failed. If something like that could be done, it might be the best way to go.”

“An interesting plan, to be sure. What about you, young man?” he asked Matt.

“Give up the object immediately,” he answered at once. “No *possession* is worth the life of your grandson, is it?”

“Not normally, no. Let me show you what it is.” He got up and went over to a case, which he unlocked using a key from his pocket. He lifted out an ancient looking book, and set it on the table before us. “Go ahead,” he said.

I opened the cover and flipped through the pages. I had just started taking the ancient languages classes, so I had no idea what language this was, but something did catch my eye. A circle, much like the ones I saw when Iris used magic. Matt seemed to realize this too.

“Do you know what that is?” asked Zhou.

“Magic,” I answered simply.

“Indeed. Dark magic. But of course that is only a small part of what the book contains, and those without the spark of magic would be unable to make use of that knowledge. But there are other rituals within that would be usable by normal people.”

I hadn’t taken the dark arts elective, but I knew that much from experience. Burn candles created a certain way, make a sacrifice, say the right words, and you can get a demon’s attention. Much harder than how a true summoner would do it, but possible.

“Why keep it around?” asked Matt. “If it has such dangerous knowledge in it?”

“I wish I could destroy it,” he answered, closing it again and locking it away. “But destroying knowledge seems wrong to me. People must have the power to choose their path. If I destroy this knowledge, that choice is taken away from them forever. Is that really right?”

“So then give it to them. Let them make the choice.”

He turned. “That would seem to be the proper course, wouldn’t it? But at the same time, it would increase disorder in the world. Letting something through that way, it could do a lot of damage before it could be destroyed. I am torn in many directions.” He paused. “You young people today surprise me. You accept that an old book full of gibberish could actually contain dark rituals for summoning demons!” He gave a low chuckle.

“What can I say,” I quipped, “you have a very honest face.”

“Thank you for noticing. In any case, the choice is not yet mine to make. They have indicated to me what item of mine they want, but not when or how I am to bring it to them. They keep our conversations short, tracking technology being what it is.”

“So you don’t know where they are?” I asked. He shook his head. “Then there’s not much we can do.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “You are here, are you not? That must mean something. I do not think the Heavens have abandoned me so totally as to punish an innocent child for my choices.” He looked over at the two policemen, still lurking by the door. “Ah, I see. Could you two gentleman wait out in the hall for a moment? Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.” They grumbled about it, but they went out into the hall and closed the door. “Please, feel free to speak freely about whatever you wish.” We both looked at him. “Ah, by now you’ve sensed my spiritual energy and found it lacking, or at least you have, just Dean. Just Matt seems a little too young to have mastered that technique but I’ve been surprised before. Very well, I shall wait over here if that’s easier for you.”

He went to the other side of the room, and started humming to himself.

“This guy isn’t normal, he knows too much,” whispered Matt.

“But at the same time, he doesn’t have powers, I checked!” I protested.

“We can’t just turn a blind eye, that book is bad news.”

“There’s just the two of us, you know. Sorry Iris, the three of us. I know phoenixes don’t like to get drawn up in combat. I can’t make any more spirit clones and I’m dragging because of the ones I’ve already got. I mean I have some nice talismans that won’t be dragged down but they’re for killing. I don’t want to go slaughter a bunch of people, even if they are in some kind of mafia.”

“But you could use your phase one, right? Just get in and get him out while I have some angels provide a distraction.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“That could work, but we still have no way of finding him!”

“Leave that to me,” said Iris.

“What?” we both said.

“Return me to Heaven and give me five minutes. I’ll go grab the spell of descry creature. I can cast it from writings, you know? Petition me again and I’ll do it from here. I’ll need a picture of him though, I can’t focus the spell without knowing his name and what he looks like. I’m not great at it, but I can take extra time and put a bunch of energy into it and that should be enough. I can do it!” He seemed excited.

“That would be ideal. Okay, we’ll get a picture and get you back here.” Matt looked at his watch. “You’ve got five minutes.”

“Done!”

“Not that one,” I said, as he went to tear a ward off with his beak. “The other one.”

“Oh.”

He ripped off the other ward, and vanished.

“All done then?” asked Zhou, turning again.

“We think there is a way. We would need a picture of him, and to be undisturbed for several minutes.”

“I have plenty of recent pictures. This modern technology is wonderful, isn’t it? I can even see and talk to him even though he’s more than an hour away. And his parents take many pictures and send them to me, on Facebook!”

“Your son must be very proud,” I said.

“He is. He’s worried too, and doesn’t understand why he’s been targeted. I always meant to tell him about me, but the moment never seemed right. Ah well, a picture. I’ll be right back.” True to his word, Zhou provided us with many pictures, and showed us an unused bedroom we could use. “Please, take all the time you need.”

“Thank you.”

After five minutes Matt brought Iris back, and I again slapped a bind ward on him. He was clutching a sheaf of papers in a claw, and handed them over, panting. I started to put them in order, or at least what I thought was the right order.

“Almost didn’t make it,” said Iris. “You can go wherever you want in Heaven in an instant but the celestial library is enormous! Good thing I’ve been studying the magic sections lately, like you suggested, Matt.”

“Thanks for doing this,” he said. “We appreciate it.”

“What, having an adventure with you like this? They’re starting to grow on me, you know? Plus we’re doing good, there can be no higher cause than that.”

“Good to have you along.”

“What’s Heaven like?” I asked suddenly.

“Let’s just say it’s a lot better than West Virginia makes it out to be. Now, let’s get this spell read over. No, that one goes there. That’s right.”

He poured over the spell, then asked if Zhou had anything that belonged to his grandson. Also he needed the name, and he wouldn’t get the possession back.

Matt went to ask.

When he came back he was carrying a hat he said the boy had left behind the last time he visited, and provided the name.

“Then I’m ready to begin,” said Iris. “Get ready to write down what I say.” He concentrated, and magical symbols in a glowing circle started to turn and change underneath him. Finally, when all the magical symbols were in place around the circle he spoke in a flowing, musical language I assumed was ‘angel’ and suddenly the hat disappeared.

“He’s forty-seven kilometers from here, using where I’m facing as zero degrees he’s at 56 degrees across and 10 degrees down.” Matt wrote that down, and then Iris made sure he had it. “Okay.” The magical circles disappeared. “Gather up these pages, we have a kid to rescue.”

“Is this good enough?” I asked. “I mean it’s a freaking huge city out there!” But I picked up the pages and shoved them in my pouch. *Mental note, return spell before Iris leaves again.*

“I’m pretty confident in my sense of direction and navigation. I can do it.”

“Then I won’t question it. What I will question is how we’re going to keep up? I don’t know any techniques that will allow me to fly.”

Matt laughed. “I can call a sphinx. They’re super strong, and super fast. I’ve been carried by one before, they’ll help.”

Wow, Osman was terrified of using his powers, this guy is the exact opposite. Does he even know Heaven can take his powers away if they don’t think he’s using them right? Of course, he has an actual guardian angel to guide him, so maybe that makes the difference.

“Okay. I guess we ask to see the roof then, and when we come back, we’ll have his grandson. How are we going to get him back here?” I

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

snapped my fingers. “Never mind. I’ll use a contain ward. He might think he’s having a really vivid dream, but it won’t hurt him.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Matt.

I checked to make sure Iris’ ignore ward was still attached, and we told Zhou the plan.

“You want to go up to the roof? Very well, I won’t ask why. But one thing I will ask, how risky is this plan of yours?”

“I promise we won’t move against whoever is holding them until we’re sure of success,” I told him.

He looked me over. “I think you’re a man of your word, just Dean. May the All-Father watch over you. Even though I think we both know he doesn’t. Good luck.”

Just who is this guy?

He showed us the door to the roof, and told us we would have to get past it to go further.

“But if you can rescue my grandson, one little door should be nothing, right?”

“It’s not a problem. We’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“Don’t get killed, I want you kids back in one piece. See you soon.” And he went back down in the elevator.

“Come on, we all have to be touching to get through the door, and don’t let go if you’re still clipping through something.”

“Clipping?” asked Iris.

“Computer term. If you’re phased through something and you turn solid again, you won’t have a good time.”

“Understood. I’ll watch the tail feathers.”

We easily passed through the door and got to the roof, where I got out my circle and Matt started doing his thing. I looked up, and shook my head, there was so much light pollution here you could hardly see the stars.

Can people that don’t see the stars really have dreams for a better tomorrow?

With a pop a curious looking creature appeared before Matt, who bowed to him. It was large, easily twice my height, and had a lions’ body. But it had the face of a beautiful woman, and stood upright. It had an elaborate headdress, but was otherwise unclothed.

“We crave your help, noble sphinx,” he said, then went on to explain the mission.

“So let me understand this,” said the sphinx. “You want to jump off

this building with me, soar through the air while holding on, break into a stronghold of men bristling with guns that's at least ten minutes away at my top speed and rescue a child owned by a man you owe nothing to. And the only lead you have is directions from a sun herald."

"I admit it sounds silly when you put it that way," I said.

She laughed. "Don't get me wrong. I like it! You two have bravery enough for four men. I sense great confidence in you, and you are not evil. Thus your cause is just, and I'll do it!"

"Thank you," Matt said gratefully.

"Call forth your phoenix, and let us get on with this mission!"

"The phoenix is already here, I forgot to remove his ignore ward." I tore it off.

They greeted each other.

"Would you be willing to wear a bind ward, and not drain so much energy from Matt?"

"That seems wise."

I put it on her, but noticed she didn't actually have wings.

Oh well, some demons can fly without wings, maybe she can too.

"Perch upon my shoulder and hang on, sun herald. Tonight you shall learn what real speed is about!"

Iris did, and the sphinx scooped us up in her paws, running towards the edge of the building.

"Hang onto me, mortals! It could be a long drop!" As she jumped, wings seemed to shimmer into existence from her back, and she flapped them powerfully. We shot forward like nothing I had never experienced, and Iris held on for dear life.

Some minutes later, I wasn't sure how many, we landed on another rooftop.

"And you're sure this is the place?" asked the sphinx.

"I'm sure I got the angle right, and while judging your speed is difficult, I do believe we've gone far enough."

"We will know soon." She closed her eyes and concentrated. "I do sense a concentration of men that would consider me an enemy, should I attempt to rescue this Zhou's grandson. This must be the place."

"Great, let's go."

We phased through the door leading down, and started sneaking down the stairs. At each level the sphinx would sense again, and tell us if they were getting closer or farther away. Soon we stood outside the door we believed them to be behind.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Here’s the plan,” I said. “I’ll put on an ignore ward and phase through this wall. If he’s not under guard, we’ll just snap him up and be done with it. A cowards way, perhaps,” I said to the sphinx, who was looking disappointed. “But safer. Plus they won’t realize he’s gone quite so soon.”

“There is wisdom in this.”

“If he is under guard, you two get to bust in there. Draw the guard off, but please try not to kill anyone. I’ll need only seconds to get him out, so startle them, pull them into one room, and then get out. We’ll link hands and just phase out of there, that’s our escape plan. Sound good?”

Everyone agreed it did, so I put on my wards, activated my armor, and slipped into the room. It was a much smaller apartment than Zhou’s, it didn’t take me long to check the whole thing. There was a board looking guard watching a boy sleep, and three other men in the place, each with guns close at hand. I went back out, timing how long it would take me to get into position.

“Okay, there are some guards. Give me a count of seven, then bust in.” I verbally sketched out the room, telling them where to expect each guy, as I got out my almost finished contain ward. I activated my regeneration talisman, then plunged back into the room. Skidding to a halt by the kid’s bed I dropped the phase brought up the contain to stick on him. The sound of the door splintering open made the guard jump up and fumble his gun out, and a shot went off in the other room. He took off, throwing the door open and squinting against the light.

Someone turned the light on, smart. Our eyes are light adapted, theirs weren’t. That gives us another slight advantage.

The kid sat bolt upright, and I casually stuck the ward onto his back, sucking him in. Then I shoved him into my pouch, and grabbed the knife instead.

Now to get out of here.

I stabbed the man with the gun from behind, making him cry out. He certainly wasn’t expecting an attack from that quarter. My unseen ward burned away, and I was visible, something I would need to be to facilitate my escape. One member of the gang was sprawled up against the wall, as if thrown. Another was simply frozen in place, a look of fear on his face. The third was staring in shock, and the fourth of course was trying to get my knife out of his back. I held out my hands.

“Come on,” I shouted. Iris hopped up onto the sphinx’s shoulder, and she grabbed Matt. I grabbed her as she ran past, but felt a bullet slam into

my armor from behind. It crackled with energy, absorbing the impact, and I activated phase again, just in time to jump out the wall and into the night. The sphinx got her wings back and soared high into the air, laughing with delight.

“Did you see their faces? Did you? I’ll have a great story to tell the others when I get back. Thank you, petitioner and friend.”

“I’m Matt,” said Matt.

“I’m Dean,” I said.

“Glad to meet you both. Now, we will fly!” The sphinx zoomed back towards where she had come from, and deposited us on the roof on the building.

“Will there be anything else this night?” asked the sphinx.

“No, and thank you again,” said Matt.

“My name is Zelices, call upon me at any time.”

“I will.” Zelices turned to show the ward, and Matt tore it off. She vanished.

“One more phase, and we can go home,” I said, holding out my hands.

“You have him?” asked Zhou, as we walked in again. He had sent the policeman out of the room again.

“He’s safe,” I said. “Just tear this piece of paper apart. I’d do it over something soft, though.” Of course, normally I would have gotten him out and walked him back down the stairs, but I had a feeling this guy wasn’t what you would call normal.

He stared at it, then began to laugh. “You put him in a contain ward?”

Thought so. He even knew the right name to use.

“I thought it might be the easiest way to get him back here. Also he would ask fewer questions that way. He’s just woken up, but found himself in... whatever space a contain ward actually contains. He probably believes he’s dreaming, if he didn’t go back to sleep already.”

“Probably. I will tear it after you leave, to avoid other questions.”

“There is one question I’d like to ask,” I said. “Who exactly are you? I think you know a little more than you should about the supernatural world for an interested amateur.”

He sighed. “You have done me a great service, so I suppose you have earned an answer. I will show you.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Before our eyes Zhou seemed to change, growing larger, and taking on the aspect of an angel with four wings. He was clad in shimmering armor, and a halo of holy light shone round him.

“A Power!” said Matt. “You’ve been living here, on Earth, rather than Heaven? Not that I would question your judgement, of course.”

“Why not? I have questioned it often enough. Yes, I am a Power. When many of my brethren fell to become Grigori, I was angry, it was true. But the All-Father placed humanity before us, his holy creations, and I wanted to *understand* that decision. I have been learning a little more of the answer to that question every day. Such as when two high school students show up at my door one evening out of the blue and offer to rescue my grandson. Heaven does work in mysterious ways, don’t you find?”

“But how?” asked Matt.

“I’m guessing the spirit shape technique?” I ventured.

“That’s right. It was a difficult technique to learn, but I kept at it. Then I came here, to live among mortals, as a mortal.”

“Spirit shape?” asked Matt.

“It’s a spirit energy disguise technique. You can become a single, mundane form, like a cat or a bird. Even a child. He uses it to become an old man.”

“Oh.”

“You have the right of it.”

“But wait, did you... I mean, you have a grandson...”

He smiled. “No, it’s not what you’re thinking. Yes, I am capable in that form, but as I chose the form of a rather elderly gentleman, it would be rather awkward to proposition a woman young enough to have my children. I adopted my son many years ago and helped him through a difficult time. He later married and bore me my grandson. That is why I must soon make a choice there as well. I do not seem to age, you understand, and he’s beginning to wonder about it. Do I move on and throw this persona away, or tell my son what I really am and risk his not understanding? I wish to be honest, and my silence is somewhat of a lie, but I do not want to risk the loss of my family that I have come to love. It is a most vexing problem.”

“I can imagine.”

“Just tell him you’re an immortal due to some incident you don’t fully understand,” I suggested. “There are unclassified powers yet in the world, and touched exist. I’m sure at least some of them aren’t found by the Foundation. It wouldn’t be that much of a stretch to have been missed, and not know who to talk to about your condition.”

“That would be a lie.”

“Would it? You *are* immortal, and do you know exactly how the All-Father made you that way?”

“I suppose not. Just saying ‘He willed it so’ is not true understanding.” He brightened. “Yes, that may be a way out. Thank you.”

“Of course. You better get him out of there, I would hate to think he was terrified of what’s going on.”

“I will, but there is one other thing. The real reason I think you were led to me, because it is information that may be vital to you. In my other form I do not have my powers, so I will occasionally take this form when I feel the need. I have often felt the need, of late. I am more attuned to happenings in the world because of what I know, even without powers, and I have been compelled to investigate. You may not know this, but we Powers have the ability to suppress the chaos that happens around us to a small degree. If something is random, we can, in essence, give that event the opportunity to happen the way we desire. To this end we can sense chaos in the world. And chaos is growing. I do not know what that means or how it is being accomplished, but I know it is dangerous. Please, seek out the source of this chaos and find a way to restore the balance it used to share with order.”

“We’ve noticed some odd things,” I said. “A container of glitter knocked over and forming a perfect ring on the floor.”

“That would be a part of this. Order and Chaos are surging against each other now, like a tide. But if they surge too high, the world may be irrevocably changed.”

“I understand. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I will look into it.”

“Then my faith is not misplaced, son of Cain. Go with my blessing, for what it’s worth.”

He started to shrink back down again, and was soon the Zhou we knew.

“What will you do about your grandson?” Matt asked. “There may be reprisals from the gang, once they come to their senses. Of course with our zany rescue, they may just drop the whole thing.”

“I believe it’s time for me to move, take away the temptation of the book. Without that, he will be safe. Not to worry, I’ve done it many times.”

Matt scribbled down his email address, and I added mine. “Please contact us if you need anything.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I’ll mail you right away so you have mine, and I invite you to do the same. Especially if you find this agent of chaos, or whatever is happening in the world. I would be interested to know what is causing these surges.”

“You and me both. Good luck,” I said, and we both left the building.

We headed back towards the roof because there wasn’t a lot of activity there, and I threw down the ward to get us near the teleport anchor again.

“Wonder how the others did,” said Matt.

“I know one group got in a bit of trouble...” I answered, and stepped through.

ROBERT ZIEFEL

10

Making Magic

“Friendship is magic.” --Discord

Once I returned to the school I took a moment to sort through the memories of my first clone’s experiences. That was the first time a clone of mine had been in existence for that long, that far away from me. It was odd, to say the least, having two sets of distinctly different memories for a single time. I knew I would shortly be adding a third set so I wanted to be prepared.

We hung out near the teleport room waiting for the group with Matt and my second clone to return, and I wondered if I was in trouble for the mansion thing. I mean, it wasn’t my fault, exactly, that happened. It was my clone’s fault, but he was me. Though I admit I may have overreacted to the presence of demons, and Elizabeth going slightly nuts couldn’t have been anticipated. *In fact, wasn’t it better she learns what happens if she copies someone’s spirit grades when she’s out in the middle of nowhere? If she had been in a city or something it could really have been a disaster.* Of course, the only reason Christina pushed it so high was to knock out the electronics for the house. She didn’t normally use that level, it was too destructive. In any case my parents fixed it up, and I don’t even think they realized it was a clone me. Not that anyone could, technically.

Finally my third self returned, and pulled some papers from his pouch.

“I’m not sure what would happen if I went away and was still carrying this. Maybe it would go into my original’s pocket dimension. Maybe it would just pop out where I was. Or it could just vanish. Better not chance it. You can have them back before you leave, as I figure it’s a little too awkward for you to try and carry them around.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Good thinking,” Iris replied.

“Any problems?” I asked, thinking of the mansion.

“We did good, as you’ll know soon,” said my duplicate. “But we got some information, and it isn’t good. The principal will have to hear it, and relay it to the Foundation.”

“Okay, I’m ready.”

“Nice working with you, Matt.”

“Likewise,” he replied.

My duplicate vanished, and I started reviewing what “he” had done. Everyone looked over at me.

“He’s right. We better get up to the office.”

But for a wonder, the principal wasn’t in the office, so we asked around and found out he was at the pool.

“The pool?” asked Christina.

“He’s still a person, and it is the weekend,” said Osman. “We can’t expect him to be at our beck and call.”

“I should probably go and write up what I learned anyway, save him the trouble. He’ll want to submit a report to the Foundation. If it has my name on it, so much the better.”

“But what happened?” asked Yasui, “what did you learn?”

“Come on, I’ll want your help Matt, make sure I don’t leave anything out. I’ll tell you as I write it.”

So I wrote out what the Power had said about chaos surging in the world, and his concerns about it. I emailed it to the principal and hoped he had a nice swim. It was past lunchtime, so we went to get something to eat and talked about what the angel had said. After we finished, Iris spoke up.

“Want to talk to Bennu now?” he asked.

“Better get it over with,” I sighed.

So Iris used magic to get Bennu here, and he seemed unsurprised to be called back.

“How goes the hunt?” he asked after we exchanged pleasantries.

“We actually did find something I would call a phoenix egg,” I said, “it looked something like this.” I showed him a picture of the thing on my phone, and he nodded.

“Certainly looks genuine.”

“I made you a replica, take a look.” I had asked for two, whole,

empty eggshells from the cafeteria, and as they were used to weird requests down there apparently, they handed it over without question. As I only wanted to change the shell, and that didn't really weigh anything, I had easily transformed the hen eggshell into phoenix eggshell. It had the same crimson sheen as the original, but felt hollow. The real one had something inside, it was heavy. I also had combined the two together, allowing for enough mass to expand the model, making it more life sized.

"That does look like it would be appropriate for our race. Wait- You saw it? Touched it? Where is it? Why do you not have it?"

"It belongs to a woman named Sophie Eisenberg, in Germany. I can give you the address."

"What?" he squawked. "It belongs to phoenix kind, the only child of our race! You just left it there?"

"Of course I left it there!" I said, a little miffed. "It wasn't mine to take. She just lost her father a few days ago, you want me to steal her possessions as well? I got it back from the people that stole it from her, I wasn't about to run off with it myself."

"It was stolen from us originally, if you want to be technical about it. You would just be returning it to the rightful owners. Us."

I shook my head. "The phoenix race gave up rights to it when you hid it and allowed humans to come into possession of it. It's not alive yet, it's just an egg. And an egg can be owned. In any case, don't get worked up. She's willing to sell it, all we need to do is get the Foundation involved, and I'm sure they'll offer her a tidy sum for it. Of course, you might have to do something for them, or owe them a favor, but you'll have it back. It's not out of reach."

"You want me to bargain for the life of a phoenix chick? Like it was some clay pot from antiquity? I don't believe this." He threw up all four of his wings.

"Believe it. If you want me to steal it, fine, say the word. I'll teleport back there and swipe it. But it'll be on your conscience, not mine. I'll just be following the orders of the prince of phoenixes, *your majesty*." I bowed.

"You really won't bring it to me?"

"No, I won't."

"Even though I might deny you learning magic for defying me?" He stared intently at me with one eye.

I gritted my teeth. "Yes."

"What if I offered you access to the Heavenly libraries for it, instead? I'm sure there might be some interesting talismans recorded there

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

you haven't thought of. Secrets of creating objects like Yasui's boots, for instance? It wasn't just a matter of adding powers, you know, there are techniques to make it easier. You could learn them."

"What, are you a demon now? Tempting me with promises of power for my soul? I guess I had you figured wrong. This conversation is over." I turned to leave.

"Wait."

"Yes?"

"It seems I did not figure you wrong. Congratulations, you passed. I'll allow Iris to school you in the basics of magic."

I threw my head back and laughed. "You sneak! It was all just a test!"

"I had to know, yes. Well done. I hope the tasks I set were not difficult for you?"

"You knew?"

"Not as such. However, in Heaven we can see the signs, and we have seers of our own. I went and asked where you would be the most useful, and those three fit the bill."

"So you knew where the egg was the whole time?"

"Perhaps. The point is you have all shown your loyalty and dedication to doing right, and for that I congratulate you. I cannot offer you any material rewards, but know that you have a friend in Heaven, in me. Should you find yourself there, ask for me, and I shall come."

We all thanked him and he was released from the spell, vanishing.

"And you were worried," said Yasui, poking me with her elbow.

"I guess I should have seen something like that coming. Anyway, you've been a big help today Iris so I won't ask for more at the moment." I handed him the spell papers back. "We can talk next week about the kinds of spells you think it would be best I learn, knowing what you know about magic and about my level of skill."

"Of course. I look forward to it!"

"See you."

I tore off the ward and Iris vanished.

"Thanks, everyone. Hopefully I can pay you all back sometime. Even if I only learn a single spell, I think what we went through will be worth it."

They all agreed, and went to their separate tasks for the weekend.

Me? I had some thinking to do about magic, and some research to do about chaos.

My research in the days that followed didn't turn up anything specific about chaos, or what would happen if it suddenly increased in the world. Of course, that I could guess on my own- nothing good.

The Helping People Club got some first hand lessons in magic though, so we got to recognizing it. Iris explained the differences in the various branches of magic, usually categorized by planet.

"So it's the traditional pairings then, like Mars for fire and Venus for beauty and love?" asked Yasui.

"Indeed, that may be where those ideas came from originally," explained Iris. "Now, this is important. I'm a natural magician, meaning some of my own energy is consumed when I cast a spell. Most demons are the other type, they draw all their magical energy from the environment."

"Is one better?" I asked.

"Depends on what you mean by better," said Iris. "They can cast more spells per day because they don't tire themselves out, yes. But we naturals have a compensation. We can burn *more* spirit energy and give our spells a boost. Guess why I'm telling you this?"

"I'm pretty sure it's because you want me to spend a lot of energy when I do magic, because I'm going to be so bad at it."

"Correct! Magic is dangerous. If you're making a ward and you press a little too hard and tear the paper, it's not going to explode you, is it?"

"No."

"But get a spell wrong and it will kill you, or blind you, or whatever the opposite of whatever it was you were trying to do."

"I'll be careful."

"Good. As I'm teaching you, hopefully that's the style of spell casting you'll use. You could probably relearn the Planets and the spells if you met a scholar of magic and learned from them, but I don't recommend it."

I wonder if I could concentrate on magic and attune my soul to it like I can for other supernatural powers? Then I would be able to get better at it normally.

We went through each planet, and I paid close attention to what he was telling me about the different ways to move and feel out the magic. Of course, I was recording all this so if I missed anything, or wanted to go back over it (and over it, and over it) I could. Then he brought up the issue of casting time.

"Here's where it gets tricky," he said. "Each spell takes a certain amount of time, with more powerful spells generally taking longer. There's

a handful that take over a minute, a couple that take 10 minutes or longer, and a few that take hours. You can look at the spell I brought now.”

I turned over the pages, interested to see what he had brought for the first lesson.

“Now by tricky I mean bizarre. Like, magic doesn’t make sense, bizarre. This here is the spell of light, a grade two spell. I had it translated into English for you, take a look here. This indicates the time, in seconds, it takes to cast.”

I looked, and it read .5.

“Half a second? How can you do anything in half a second?”

“Yeah, what’s he going to do for the other half second?” asked Yasui with a smile.

“You’ll get a feel for it. Now magic can be accelerated or lengthened, to a certain degree. You can speed it up all you want, which makes it harder to do. Or you can stretch it out, which makes it easier. The rule of thumb is you can stretch it out about fifty percent longer.”

“So in this case, a whole quarter of a second?”

“Not much, I admit. You’ll feel the magic resist any efforts to be extended past a certain point, and it just won’t get any better. Of course, the exception to this is casting from writings.”

“Wait, I don’t have to memorize all this? That would be an advantage. I have several wards, circles, spirit rituals, and whatever else bouncing around my head now. If I could just read, say, calling a spirit off a page, I would!”

“There are advantages and disadvantages, which I’ll go over now. The disadvantage is, it’s harder. In the case of this spell, about 60% harder.”

I whistled.

“But that’s only because it’s such a short one. Trying to read the symbology, visualize it, say the word and do the gesture all at once is pretty tricky. A spell that takes longer on the other wing, you get longer to cast it correctly before you let the magic go.”

“Okay, I can see that. What’s the benefit?”

“Two of them. Like you said, you don’t have to memorize it, and the magic is a little more forgiving when being cast from writings.”

“Forgiving? What, is it a stern parent?”

Iris chuckled. “You’ll find magic seems to have a mind of its own. You ask it for a task, like lighting your way through a hallway. Once you’re out of the hallway, poof, the light goes away no matter how much you want to hang on to it.”

“I... see.”

“So, basically double any time you see written in the spell formula when you cast from writings. Can you see how that’s to your benefit?”

“I can,” said Osman. “You can still lengthen that by fifty percent!”

“He’s got it right. This spell that would normally take a half second can be extended to a second and a half. Now is that enough to overcome the additional strain of casting it from writings? Maybe. Again, choose longer spells to get a more tangible benefit.”

“The spells I want probably are the more complex ones. I can do a lot just by myself, so it’s only the stuff I can’t easily do that I’ll want to compensate for with magic.”

“Did you have something in mind?”

“As an example, I can’t do what seers do, and tell truth from lies just from hearing someone talk. Is there a spell to do that?”

“Yes there is.”

“Or maybe breathe underwater? A ward would get washed right off, so trying to make a ward that would do it would be pointless.”

“That’s doable as well.”

“Excellent. I’ll- wait a second.”

“Yes?”

“It’s magic. Could I have said basically anything as my examples and you would have said the same thing?”

I wasn’t sure how a bird could grin, but he tried it. “You caught me, what you said is correct.”

I shook my head. “I’ll get you a list of what sorts of things I can already do, and maybe you’ll know some neat magic that can extend my repertoire.”

“Ou La La,” said Yasui.

“Now, rather than learning with this grade 2 sun spell, let’s get you started casting a simpler sun spell, what we ‘in the biz’ so to speak call a grade 0 spell, or cantrip.”

Iris made me go through the motions for about a half hour before he pronounced me ready to actually attempt casting a real spell. The others leaned forward, breathless. I put my fingers in the position Iris suggested and focused on *magic light*. For a split second I saw a minor circle appear that I associated with Iris casting magic, and then it went away.

“Did it work?” Elizabeth asked excitedly.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

"I'm... not sure. I feel something, but I don't see anything."

"Turn the lights off," Iris suggested. Osman turned to go hit the switch, but Kat clicked it off from where he was standing.

"Thanks," he grumbled as the lights went out.

That's when I saw it. Hanging in the air was a tiny light, like a candle flame.

"Congratulations, Dean," said Iris. "You just cast your first magic spell."

"Say, that wasn't so bad!"

"There's a reason I chose Sun magic to start you off on. It relies mostly on how well you can manipulate your hands. I figured that would be a strength with you, given you being an artificer, and all. Plus I've seen some of those drawings you've done. Not bad."

"Thanks," I said, staring at my little pinprick of light. "So what's next, sensei?"

"Let's move on to something relating to air and movement, Mercury."

It took an entire week, but Iris finally pronounced me fit to cast magic from any Planetary school. I had picked up the basics of casting, and was ready to try my hand at actual spells, rather than just little tricks. In other words, enough theory and let's make real magic!

"As far as that goes, I have a little surprise for you," said Iris. "Let's go outside again."

He cast the spell to get Bennu back, who appeared holding what seemed to be a book.

We greeted him, and he asked about how the magic lessons were going.

"We've all been learning a lot, actually," said Elizabeth. "I've been looking up magic in the library too, because demons use it a lot. But Iris has been making some things clear for us. He's great."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now, Dean, I was incorrect when I left you the last time. I said I couldn't give you any physical reward. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that wasn't exactly correct. So here." He offered the book to me, and I thanked him and paged through it.

"Is this?"

Bennu nodded. "Your own book of magic. Obviously you'll have to keep a close eye on it, not that one in a million people would know what to do with it. I've been talking to Iris about what spells you might want, and I

chose at least one from every planet and had them translated into English for you.”

“This is amazing,” I said, stunned. “Thank you so much!”

“No, thank you for tracking down our egg. You earned it.”

“But I didn’t expect this.”

“Then it was the right gift to give you. One thing, you’ll see the spell in there that Iris uses to bring me here. You could just learn to petition me yourself, Osman.”

“I... you wouldn’t mind?”

“After the adventures Iris has had? I’m sort of jealous. But anyway, it will call any celestial being. I strongly advise against using it to call anyone but myself or Iris here. Of course, any you’ve met through Osman and you don’t think would mind would be fine too. As long as you’ve discussed it with them first. But just calling any old random angel...” He left the threat unsaid. “Do we understand each other?”

“We do. I haven’t learned any techniques like petitioning or making holy water for the same reason.”

“Good. I don’t mind, if it’s an emergency, but others might not be so forgiving. That’s about it. Don’t get yourself killed with this. But if you do, come visit me in Heaven!”

“Uh, yeah. I’ll be careful.”

“Good man. See you all later!”

He vanished.

“So, want to go over the formulas?” asked Iris. “And I can answer any questions you might have about the individual spells.”

“Yes, please!”

Curses

Curse you, spiny, blue, shell!

It was now halfway through October and I was worried our initial visitor to the Helping People Club was going to be a fluke. I mean, yes, I said if I helped one person I would be satisfied and I was, but helping two people would be twice as good, right? So when the door banged open and a boy about my age burst in, I looked up excitedly from my homework.

Then I wished I hadn't.

He quickly closed the door and crouched down, and a stream of people went past the room, laughing and shouting. He looked Mexican, with dark hair and eyes.

"Uh..." said Yasui.

"Look, you guys are the so called Helping People Club, right?"

"So called?" I asked indignantly.

"You don't need our help, you need a tailor," said Elizabeth, trying not to giggle. She wasn't trying that hard.

"What do you mean?" asked the boy. "Anyway, I need your help."

"Yes, I can see that. Look, do you want to stand behind something, or something?"

"What? Why? Are they coming back?" He fearfully glanced over his shoulder through the glass, but there was no one there.

"You know..." I said, pointing a finger in his general direction. "All of it?"

"All of what? What did she do to me?"

"What did who do to you?" asked Osman. "Start at the beginning. I'm Osman."

“Great. I’m Jose Fletcher. Do you think they’re gone?”

“Just a second, Kat wants to do something,” said Osman. He went over to Jose and asked “Now what?”

“What do you mean, now what?” asked Jose.

“Not talking to you,” said Osman, as the window frosted over completely. “Oh, I see what you wanted. Yes, that was actually a good idea.”

Jose edged away from the kid he believed was now talking to himself, and came to sit down. Elizabeth was still giggly.

“What’s her problem?” he asked.

“She’s easily amused. I’m Dean, the laughing girl is Elizabeth...” I went around and introduced everyone. “So what’s this about someone doing something to you?”

“She cursed me! I was set up, and she cursed me!”

“Slow down, start at the beginning.”

“Okay, okay. I’m a soul wielder, as you can see.” He indicated his shoulder like there was something there. There wasn’t. “And everyone’s been super about me coming here late.”

Elizabeth stopped laughing long enough to shoot me a questionable look.

“They weren’t allowed at the school until recently. The power was deemed too dangerous, but I convinced Mr DeLefeu it was also too useful to overlook. Thus he’s letting people with that power come and be trained now.”

“And it was a pretty big surprise, let me tell you. I was a sophomore at my old school and I figured I’d be going back there this year. But then I got this weird letter talking about this “power” I had and would I like to come learn how to use it? I couldn’t sign up fast enough!”

I know the feeling.

“So because I’m so far behind everyone I’m taking some special classes, and I’m getting tutoring. I don’t mind, it’s all powers based stuff, which is great. Anyway, some people I thought were my friends said they hung out all the time in the girl’s locker room and watched them change.”

“Oh, this’ll be good,” said Christina.

“I asked how, and they said there was this ward called ignore they could get me.”

“Did no one tell you about seers?” asked Osman.

“Oh, they did. But they said it was fine, they could get me another ward called immunity that could make me immune to seer power. Naturally I wanted to come with them, so they got me the wards.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“And here our story takes a dramatic turn for the worse,” said Elizabeth.

“Tell me about it. I thought they were right behind me, just I couldn’t see them.”

“Wait, the wards worked?” I asked.

“The one did. No one in the halls even looked at me. It was like I was invisible. So I went into the girl’s locker room behind a girl so the door didn’t open suspiciously, and started looking around. Well, this one girl screamed and ran over to me, and pulled the ignore ward off me.”

“Oh, the immunity ward didn’t work!” I said, figuring that was the case.

“I guess. Or it was fake, and they knew it. Anyway, suddenly I’m surrounded by angry girls and one of them starts yelling this curse at me. Next thing I know, everyone’s pointing and laughing. I ran out of there, but it didn’t stop. Everyone started doing it. What did she do to me? Tell me honestly, am I hideous or something now?”

“You don’t know?” shrieked Elizabeth. “You’re sitting there naked and you don’t even know it?”

“What do you mean?” asked Jose. “I’m not naked. I mean, here’s my collar right here.” He lifted an invisible collar. “No, it must be something else. Come on, tell me, please?”

“Exactly what did this girl say to you?” asked Osman.

“Let me see if I remember. Something soma, something about something hidden in plain sight, and I won’t know it. I wasn’t really paying attention.”

“That’s helpful,” said Yasui. “Look, this was a couple of minutes ago?” she asked. Jose nodded his head. “I’ll be right back.” She slipped the Time Frame out of her bag and headed towards the door. She grabbed a notebook and pencil as she went past, then pulled her eyes away from Jose.

“Where’s she going?”

“Get the exact words of the curse. That’s the only way we’ll break it,” I answered.

“Oh.” We sat in silence for a moment. “Guess I have to find some new friends, huh?”

“I don’t know, they may have just been playing a prank on you,” said Osman. “They couldn’t know you would be cursed.”

“The immunity ward could have been made improperly, it might not have been malicious,” I put in. “But of course, they didn’t spring to your rescue when you got caught, either.”

“No, they didn’t. But then, that would have been them just not wanting to be caught like I was. There’s just so much to learn about what powers can

and can't do, you know? And the fact that demons and angels are real? That's crazy."

"Yeah, it can get pretty crazy around here at times," said Christina. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything."

"Yeah, me either." Jose smiled.

"Too bad only the person that created the curse can take it off," said Elizabeth. "Remind me to tell you the trouble we had with one, and an unholy chosen, sometime."

"Hey, I had trouble with one of them once too," I said. "He killed me!"

They both looked at me like I was crazy, but my friends were nodding their heads.

"I got better. On the plus side, this girl is now maintaining it with energy, so she has a little less than she did before."

"Oh, that's a great comfort." He looked at my badges. "You know a lot about it for being a... what is that? Artificer?"

"They don't have enough pins to show what Dean is," Elizabeth said, taking one of my arms in both of hers. "You can trust that what he's saying is true."

"I just wondered if you had been placed under a curse yourself once, that's all."

I shook my head. "No, but I read all about them, in case I wanted to learn how to use them myself. I decided no thanks."

He looked at me as if wondering how to ask his next question, when Yasui came back in and tossed the notebook to the table.

"There it is," she said. Elizabeth had moved back when she came in, and Yasui glared at her. She maintained an innocent look.

We looked over what Yasui had written.

Until you bring me a soma fruit to eat, what you wish most to keep hidden will be in plain sight of everyone, though you know it not.

"Now that's a proper curse!" I exclaimed. "Direct, somewhat easy to break, not at all like yours, Elizabeth."

"Devious," said Christina. "No matter how much we tell him he won't believe it. It's built into the thing that he not know what's going on with him."

"So what did she do?" Jose asked.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“You’re naked!” shouted Christina.

“I keep telling you I’m not!”

She shook her head. “So how are we going to help this poor sucker?”

“What’s a soma fruit?” asked Elizabeth.

“Soma,” explained Osman, “was originally a holy fruit, grown in the garden of Eden. When the All-Father decided to toss us out because Samael was a little too good at his job, he also decided the fruit had to go. The great bird like simurgh agreed to go with the trees and protect them. Of course the place they all went was the Demon World. Sadly, both the fruit and the simurgh have been a bit corrupted from their long stay, and neither are what they once were.”

“Back up,” said Christina. “You almost sound critical of the All-Father there, Osman. Thought that was a no-no for holy people.”

“It’s a no-no for angels and holy chosen,” he replied. “Petitioners have to call angels responsibly, yes, but we get to call things like we see them. Honestly, the All-Father said ‘tempt human kind’ and the *angel* Samael said ‘okay’ and did it. Then he got punished for it? Is it any wonder a bunch of angels got confused and fell?”

“I... okay.”

“So the fruit has some kind of special property” Jose asked, bringing the conversation back to himself.

“I guess it’s like eating a whole meal with just a few bites. Plus there’s some way to prepare it and become immortal? I don’t know, not much is known about how far the corruption has gone.”

“Wait, this stuff is in the Demon World? How am I going to get some to give it to her?”

I sighed. “That is an excellent question. We would have to sign all kinds of waivers to get permission to go there. And probably bring at least one adult with us.”

“I don’t want any teachers knowing I was in the girls’ locker room!”

“Which would be worse?” asked Christina. “Us getting in trouble for trying to get you out of your predicament, or you getting in trouble for having a trick played on you and being a normal guy?”

“It’s just... There aren’t many of us, you know? If the principal thought it was a bad idea to bring us here, he might send me back.”

“I think as long as you don’t destroy any souls with your powers, you’ll be fine,” I said.

“Not to mention the other girl,” said Yasui. “She would get in trouble for cursing you.”

“What do I care about that?” asked Jose. “I’m the victim here, remember?”

“No, all those girls you were about to peep on are the victims. You should be thankful a true martial artist didn’t slam you through a wall or something.”

“Could one do that?”

“Let’s find out.”

“Now, now, this isn’t helping,” said Osman. “What’s done is done. Both sides share responsibility for this. Yasui, you must have seen the girl who cursed him. Can you go find her and ask her to lift it?”

“Already done, me amigo. It was the swim club that was in there changing, so that was nice timing on your part, Jose. I went looking for her and asked her to lift it. She said no way.”

Jose groaned. “What am I going to do?”

“Not much we can do,” I said. “We can get to the Demon World easily enough, but unless one of you has seen where they grow the fruit, that’s as far as we would get.”

“Wait a second, couldn’t we ask that naga who knows me?” Christina asked. “He seemed reasonable, I mean, for a demon. Right?”

“Hey, good idea! We’ve seen Bhogavati, we could get there,” said Yasui excitedly.

“Where I can be useless again, great,” grumped Osman.

“Not so much anymore,” I reminded him, pointing to the tattoo on his hand.

“Well...”

“So it’s doable then?” asked Jose, hopeful.

I leaned back in my chair. “It would be breaking school rules to leave, but we could get there easily enough. Bhogavati is very human friendly, and I doubt the simurghs would attack on sight. So there’s little danger, apart from, you know, being there. The question is, do we tell anyone we’re leaving?”

“Of course,” said Osman. “To do otherwise would be dishonest.”

“But what about our charter?” I asked. “The confidentiality of our clients must be assured. Hasn’t this man been ridiculed enough for one day? To further punish him by telling on him goes against what we originally thought of.”

“Ah, but didn’t you promise that anything illegal would be brought to his attention immediately?”

“Crap!” I made fists with my hands. *How could I have been so foolish?*

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“He’s got you there, Dean,” said Christina. “You better go ask.”

Which is how I found myself in the principal’s office a few moments later.

“So this boy, who you do not wish to name, needs to present a soma fruit to a girl you don’t know to break a curse?” he summarized.

“Correct,” I said. “Unless you happen to have some handy, there seems only two solutions.”

“The first, and most logical being to get this girl to break the curse she shouldn’t have used in the first place.”

“Of course. But I’m pretty sure you won’t threaten expulsion, and anything else she may decide is worth it to see him in his current state for a few days.”

“I could see that happening.”

“The other is why I’m here.”

“You’re volunteering to go retrieve it?”

“We are,” I clarified. “We’ve been to the demon world before, and you know we can take care of ourselves. There should be no danger where we’re headed, at least, no more than the environment itself provides.”

“What you haven’t taken into account is that simurghs bargain for information. Do you have information worth one of their fruits? They won’t part with it lightly.”

“I don’t know, but probably not. I was hoping we could work something out when we got there.”

“Blank checks to demons, even ones that used to be terrestrial creatures, have a way of backfiring. I wouldn’t advise it.”

“So we just leave him like this?”

“No, we can’t do that either. Very well, just a second.” He picked up the phone and dialed a number. “Hello, Nikko? It’s Lucian. Fine, how are you? That’s good. Have a job for you, some students want to go to the demon world and talk to the simurgh. Are you free? You are? Great. Yes, today if you can manage it, there’s a sort of situation here. Half an hour? Sounds good. I’ll have them meet you outside the teleport point. It’ll be a Dean Chesterfield and party. Yeah, sixteen, but thinks he’s thirty.”

I gave him a dark look.

“Thanks a lot.” He hung up and turned back to me. “You might not know this, but there are people that work as guides to the Demon World. Nikko Våga, the one I just called, is pretty good. He’ll keep an eye on you while you’re there.”

“Sounds fair to me,” I said, surprised he was letting us go at all.

“Get your things around and head through the teleport circle to this city.” He handed me an address. “The person on duty can tell you which one to go through. He’ll meet you outside.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the paper.

“Just get this taken care of and get back here, okay?”

I saluted. “Yes, mon capitain!”

He shooed me out of the office.

Half an hour later the members of the Helping People Club stepped through a teleport circle to England, where we were meeting Nikko. Jose was snug in a contain ward, and put in my pouch so he didn’t have to run around the school “naked.” A young looking man stepped up and looked us over. “Dean Chesterfield?” he asked. He was faired skinned, with brown hair and eyes, and he had an accent I couldn’t place.

“That’s me,” I said with a smile. “Let me introduce the Helping People Club.”

We made our introductions, and Nikko asked us “How do you want to do this?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Do you want me to be in charge, or just wait on the sidelines until you get into trouble?”

“Dean is in charge,” both Yasui and Elizabeth said at once. They glared at each other.

“Whatever you say. Let me know when you want to get going, then. I assume you guys have a way to get there?”

“We’ll take care of it,” I replied. “Incidentally, what’s on the other side at this spot? Anything we should be aware of?”

“Nothing that’ll kill you instantly, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“Okay, it’ll just be a few minutes.”

“Take your time.”

“Okay,” I said, getting my book of magic out. “I’m going to open the hole to the Demon World. We’re going to want to move fast once we’re through. Yasui, I think you’re the strongest out of all of us, think you can handle the teleport?”

“I hope so. There’s a lot of us.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I can help,” said Elizabeth. “I’ll give us both the moon spirit and choose our strength to be increased. Then I’ll just take half of us with my copycat ability.”

“Couldn’t Dean just give you both the teleport ability?” asked Christina.

“Better not chance it,” I said. “Remember, I’m terrible at it, so splitting the power would probably not work. And remember, put extra effort in, your ability to teleport depends on my skill calling the spirits. And my skill is... like I said. Anyway, up for a dance, Yasui? Elizabeth?”

“I have to dance with her?” both girls again asked at the same time.

I just shook my head and started to chant.

Unfortunately, it looked like Elizabeth had two left feet, she nearly tripped herself doing the ritual dance, but Yasui did fine and I felt the spirit was a little easier to call than it otherwise would have been. I gave Yasui the ability to teleport for 20 minutes, given I didn’t know exactly how long this spell was going to take me to cast.

While I read it over, Yasui danced for Elizabeth as she called on the spirit of the moon. She of course seemed much better at it than I was, and was able to add spirit energy into the mix. She chanted for six minutes, enough to make it last an hour. I figured I might as well not bother, if I failed after a minute I wouldn’t know it, and I could easily put it back on her. Elizabeth was much more likely to succeed, so doing it longer was the right choice in her case.

“I feel a lot stronger,” said Yasui when she was done. “Thanks.” She said this grudgingly.

Meanwhile I was reviewing the dimension gate spell, which would open a portal to the demon world. It said the casting time was two and a half seconds, so I could extend that to a total of about eight. I shook my head, magic was weird. I knew about how much energy to throw into it, and of course I took no chances, so eight seconds later a glowing portal appeared in the air. I could feel the strain of maintaining such a powerful spell dragging me down, and motioned everyone through.

“Odd technique,” Nikko observed as he stepped through. “Seemed to work though.”

We appeared in a place that looked similar to where we had left, just without all the life you would see on Earth. The land was barren and dry, and you could see mountains in the distance because there weren’t trees and buildings nearby to cover them up. The icky red sky and horizon that

curved up were normal for this place, but the black clouds floating about were new.

We have weather, I don't see why the demon world wouldn't. But it probably rains acid or something.

Here and there were some odd looking tree like things stuck in the ground, and I could see odd birds looking at us from their “branches.” I closed down the portal and stepped close to my teleport group.

“Let’s go before those birds come to investigate.”

Elizabeth and Yasui grabbed their agreed upon people, and closed their eyes to teleport.

At first, I wasn’t sure what was going on. We had moved, but I couldn’t see a darn thing.

“What’s going on?” asked Christina, fear in her voice.

Oh yeah, she doesn't like enclosed places, does she?

“Sorry!” said Yasui. “We didn’t go far enough. I’ll have to try again. Hang on.”

“Wait!” shouted Elizabeth. “I need to see you disappear in order to follow you. It’s pitch black here. Where are we, anyway?”

“Probably inside those mountains we saw back there,” said Osman. “Did someone bring a flashlight? Wait, get your knife out, Dean.”

“Or I could do this,” I said, performing the first magic I had ever done. A tiny pinprick of light appeared. “Is that good enough?”

“That’s fine. Let’s get out of here,” said Elizabeth.

We teleported again.

This time we wound up right where we wanted to be, in the middle of the naga city. As before, a naga got up and offered to show us around.

“I think I remember which way to go,” said Christina, “but we’ll be back if we get lost.”

“I’m already lost,” I remarked, totally unsure which way we had gone before.

Elizabeth was just staring, open mouthed, all around us. The city was made of gold, after all.

“Oh yeah, don’t try stealing any of it,” remarked Yasui.

“I won’t,” Elizabeth replied indignantly.

12

For a piece of fruit

*You cannot eat the fruit of this tree,
which I have conveniently placed in
the center of the garden. Have fun, kids!*

-- The All-Father

“Is Narithon around?” Christina asked the harionago at the desk. We had made it to the shop we believed the naga worked at, and the presence of the hair demon seemed to confirm it.

“Oh, didn’t you hear? He got killed in some sort of duel. Ghastly business, but what can you do?”

“Really?”

Deirdre laughed. “No, silly. He’s around here somewhere. Now most of you I remember, but who is this cute little dish?”

Everyone turned to Elizabeth. “I’m Elizabeth,” she answered.

“Oh, I could just eat you up!”

“Now, now,” said a naga, slithering up. “No eating the customers, Deirdre.” She pouted. “Christina, nice to see you again! You haven’t been visiting lately. I was beginning to think you had forgotten me.”

No doubt she had, we never actually found out how Christina had met a naga in her original timeline.

“Sorry about that, it’s been a hectic couple of years.”

“No worries. What can I get for you today?”

“I’m surprised you’re still running the store,” I remarked. “What with all the dragon treasure you must now own.”

“SHHHH, keep it down, or everyone will want one,” he said, putting a finger to his lips. “Actually, I own the whole block now, that’s why Deirdre is in charge here. I just go back and forth during the day in case

there are any special items someone needs. I saw you guys from down the street and came over.”

“Ah.”

“We need to get to the Soma forest,” explained Christina. “We can teleport there, but none of us have seen it. Unless, you wouldn’t happen to have any Soma fruit, would you?”

“Soma? That stuff is pretty rare outside the forest. Hard to sneak up on a whole roost of simurgh. Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“Anyway, that’s pretty near here. Due west, just by the river Lethe. You could take a dragon taxi to get there.”

“How long would that take?”

“About six hours I guess?”

“Six hours?! We don’t have that kind of time.”

“I guess I could sell you a picture of the place.”

“We don’t need to hold it, just look at it.”

“If I went around giving away things, where would my business be?”

“Actually, is this it?” asked Elizabeth, coming back over with a book. She held it up, and there was a picture of a forest, with bird like creatures to be seen in the distance.

“Where did you find that?” asked Narithon.

“Just over with your books,” she indicated over her shoulder. “Guidebook to the Demon World,” she said, closing it and looking at the spine. “14.99, what a great value. Do you have taxes here?”

“I guess you got what you wanted,” said Narithon sadly. “So I’ll see you in another two years or so, when you need something else?”

“Do you take human money?” asked Elizabeth, getting out a small pouch. The naga perked up.

“You’ll actually buy it?”

“Of course. I think it might be interesting to look through.”

Suddenly the naga was all business again. “Oh, it is, and we have many other fine books you probably won’t find on Earth if you’d like to stay and have a look around.”

“I’ll have to come back when we’re not as pressed for time. Thanks, though.”

“Fine, fine. Counter is right over there. Does anyone see anything else that catches their fancy? We have imports from around the demon and human worlds, something for everyone.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“We’ll keep you in mind,” said Osman.

“We’re even tolerant of those with, ugh, holy power. Why, did I ever tell you about the time I corrupted three priests with the same sack of coins? Well, it all started when—”

“Some other time, maybe? Like she said, we’re in kind of a hurry at the moment,” said Christina.

“Oh, right. Come back and visit some time, okay? Don’t be strangers!”

We left.

“How did I ever meet that guy?” Christina wondered. “And why would I have become friends with him?”

“I suppose in the right circumstance, anything can happen. Anyway, is that picture good enough?”

“I guess we’ll soon find out,” said Yasui, as she reached for us. “Ready?”

Elizabeth held the book up she could see it, and we disappeared again.

“I hope we don’t have much more teleporting to do,” said Yasui. “Using all this extra energy is wiping me out.”

“I can give you some back, but we’re here, so hopefully this won’t take much longer.”

“Why did you put us so far away?” asked Elizabeth.

“I figured it would be best to let them see us. As Osman here would probably frown on us just teleporting into the middle of the place, grabbing a fruit, and getting away again.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “I guess we just wait and see if someone comes to greet us.”

We didn’t have long to wait, one of the great simurghs quickly dashed out to where we were, stopping some short distance from us and looking down. The simurgh were easily four times as tall as a human, bird-like but standing upright on legs of a lion. It also had the head of a dog, and a long tail that trailed after it, like a peacock.

“What’s the meaning of this?” it roared, sounding rather catlike despite the canine face. “What are a bunch of- kids? Why are kids here? You shouldn’t be here!”

Yasui nudged me forward.

“Greetings, oh keeper of knowledge,” I shouted up at it. “We come in peace!”

“You don’t have to shout, we have excellent hearing. Oh, what’s the book?” she asked, looking over at Elizabeth.

“Just something I picked up to get us here,” she replied, taking a step back and holding it up.

“Oh, that one’s rubbish. Half the entries are out of date. So, you’re here, what do you want? And I ask only to see if you’ll tell me the truth, as I already know what you’re after, of course.”

“We would like to lift a curse from a classmate,” I went on. “The conditions of which specify a soma fruit be brought to the mystic that spoke the curse.”

“Just one? That’s more reasonable than most who come here. And we do appreciate you coming, by the way. Most people just yank us out of our home to talk to us. Which is very rude, of course!”

“I agree. But we couldn’t if we wanted to, none of us are summoners.”

“None of you are summoners?” said the simurgh in surprise. “And are there no summoners on your little island? No callers of demons to hire, out and about in the world? I think you could have spoken to us a little easier than making your way all the way out here.”

Our guide was nodding his head.

I felt a bit stupid. In my haste to solve this problem I hadn’t stopped to think of the most obvious solution.

No, I had to show off and bring us all the way here, first with magic, then with a spirit. I should have just asked those summoners I know if any could get a simurgh to the island and avoid this running around. But would they have brought a fruit? And the principal didn’t suggest it either...

“I see maybe I overestimated you,” said the simurgh with a sigh. “Oh well. You know we bargain for information, at least, right? So, do you have anything to offer us?”

“We were hoping we could work out some kind of deal, maybe make you something or bring something back here?”

“Oh, were you? How fortunate we have just the thing lined up!”

Why am I not surprised?

“Halfway between Forneus and the demon gate a curious structure has been built. A kind of fortress, surrounded by a high wall. Now usually we would just use our prodigious skill to look inside and see what was going on there. We hate not knowing things, you know? However, for some reason our powers are unable to penetrate the structure, and we’re in the dark. We want to know why it was built, and what’s going on in there. Sadly, we’re not very good at sneaking into places,” it spread its wings and

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

stood up fully, then sat back down. “But you little people could probably manage it. Get inside and have a look around. If you can, break open any safes or look over any loose papers you find. We can get the images out of your minds later. If you do that, we’ll give you a fruit.”

“Seems pretty dangerous for just one fruit,” remarked Christina.

“It’ll be easy,” it said to them. “I don’t even think it’s being guarded, which is the odd part. Who builds a fort and then abandons it?”

“How are we supposed to get there?” asked Yasui. “I still have teleport for a few minutes, but we’re back to the same problem we had coming here. And I doubt there’s an easily found picture of this fort.”

“I can give you the image,” said the simurgh. “It’s recent, so there won’t be any problems on my end. You don’t by any chance speak the demon tongue, do you?”

“No!”

“Oh. Well, don’t think too loudly then, I’ll have to concentrate. Don’t want to fry your brain, after all.” It laughed.

Yasui hesitantly stepped up, and the simurgh put a wing out and touched her head. They both closed their eyes a moment, and then opened them.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” she said. “There are some boulders we can use for cover, I’ll try to get us behind one of them.”

“I guess we’re off,” said Yasui.

“I’ll be here when you get back. Good luck!”

We divided again, and teleported out of the area.

We arrived exactly where Yasui said we would, and I congratulated her.

“Thanks. Can I have some energy from your talisman? I’m feeling wiped out.”

“Sure,” I said, hooking into it. I allowed her to draw energy out of it, through me, and she thanked me, saying that was much better.

Our guide sat down and tilted his hat down.

“Let me know when you want to leave,” he said, and closed his eyes.

The others, meanwhile, were studying the fortress. Or, more accurately, the wall. While I didn’t doubt what the simurgh had told me, there was just a large, probably rectangular wall in front of us. They had said fortress, so I expected a castle like structure, not just a wall. It looked like normal stone, but much too high to see over. Nor could be see any guards patrolling the area.

“Seems quiet,” said Osman.

“Yeah, a little too quiet,” said Elizabeth.

“What do you see?” I asked Osman. He was slowly moving his eyes back and forth.

“Looks like some kind of practice yard, I guess? I see what must be targets, and not for arrows, either. There’s a building inside the wall, which is pretty big, by the way. It doesn’t look that big, I think the space here is funny, maybe because of the demon gate nearby? Anyway, it’s bigger than it looks. I don’t see anyone though, that’s the weirdest part.”

“Doors?”

He shook his head slightly. “It’s a solid wall. They must come and go with teleportation or flying. It’s big enough to land a dragon inside of.”

“What about inside the building?” asked Christina. “If your eyes can penetrate the walls, we can just go back and have them read your mind!”

“Totally dark. I have no idea what’s in the building.”

“Great. Well, at least we won’t have any demons to contend with.”

“Yeah, where are they all?” asked Elizabeth. “I would expect a place like this to be crawling with them.”

“It does seem too easy, like a setup,” I said. “It’s close to the demon gate too, that seems pretty ominous.”

“Yeah, they may have built it for some future need. But there must be activity here, the simurghs wouldn’t send us to an empty fort, would they?”

“Maybe we can just report it’s empty?” suggested Elizabeth.

I sighed. “No, we’ll have to go inside somehow. They’ll want to know what’s in the building, I’m sure.”

“I was afraid you would say that. Okay, what’s the plan?”

“I’m more worried about traps and trigger wards, oh and possibly spells, then being seen. I suggest I duplicate myself, then take two teams in with my phase item. We can hit the building from two sides, and take half as long to go through it.”

“I can make us invisible,” suggested Elizabeth. “If I can give everyone the spirit of the raccoon, anyway.”

“Good suggestion. I’ll hand out ignore wards too, I don’t think we can be too careful around here. We’ll have to hold hands anyway for the phase to work, so we won’t lose track of where we all are.”

Elizabeth chanted for several minutes, and Yasui and I danced, being careful to stay on the far side of the boulder. Like I said, couldn’t be too careful.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

I managed a single clone, which is all I wanted anyway, and he passed out ignore wards.

“May as well use his,” I said. “They’re just copies anyway. Saves me making more later!”

Everyone put one on. The teams I decided should have one close range and one long range fighter, so Osman and Elizabeth (with Anthy out) were with me, and Yasui and Christina (with bow out) were with my clone. Preparations complete we grabbed hands and went invisible, then we started forward to pass into the fort. As we got close I, and presumably my clone, activated our phase talismans and smacked into a solid wall.

“Ow!” I said, rubbing my nose.

“Ow!” I heard from beside me.

“This wall is solid!” I said, unbelievably. I put my hand up against it. It was solid, all right. Though my fingers should have passed right through it, they felt cold stone instead.

“Katrina wants you to know she feels a lot of powers on the other side of this wall,” said Osman.

“She couldn’t have mentioned that ten seconds ago?” I grumbled.

“So now what?” asked Elizabeth.

“As a last resort I do have a flight spell in my book,” I said. “But casting it on all of us will be tough.”

“Let’s head back to the rock and see what we can come up with.”

So behind the rock again, we discussed our options.

“I could fly us over on Anthy,” suggested Elizabeth.

“I could jump us over, one at a time,” suggested Yasui.

“I could blow a hole in the wall,” suggested Christina.

“Hey, I could just as easily blow a hole in the wall,” protested Elizabeth.

“What happened out there, anyway?” asked Osman.

“Oh, it must be warded with more than just something to keep seer powers out. First time I’ve ever run into it, though. Get it? Run into it?”

“You’re fired,” said Elizabeth.

“So which are we doing?” asked Christina.

“Let’s do both. You guys go in with Yasui, if you really think you can jump over the wall carrying someone.”

“I’ll manage. I only need to do it twice.”

“Okay. We’ll go over on Anthy.”

“And hope something else doesn’t go wrong,” muttered Christina.

So Anthy grew to three times her original size after we climbed on her back, and we held on as best we could. We all turned invisible again, and lifted off. I now had to trust the others getting in on their own, as we separated so as not trip over each other as we walked around. Rising over the wall I saw Osman's initial survey had been correct, it looked unmistakably like a shooting range.

We saw that directly behind the wall was a narrow shelf, probably for guards to walk along and patrol. No one was there, but it was too narrow for Anthy to land on so we set down directly beneath it.

Then we waited.

Nothing happened, so we slid off her back and I felt her shrink down to size again. We waited. Again, nothing happened, so I whispered "Let's go," and joined hands with the others.

We headed across the large "training" area towards the building. I was relieved to see it had a door, but would probably try sensing the other side as best I and Katrina could before opening it. Of course I didn't expect it to open as we got nearby. I froze, and waited.

For a few seconds nothing happened, then the door closed again.

"What," asked Elizabeth, "was that all about?"

"I don't like this," said Osman.

I was about to start moving forward again when something hard collided with me and sent me sprawling. I saw the remains of a ward burn away and a Satyr was laying there, looking around. It shouted something at me in the demon tongue and I winced.

It looked around, confused, and spotted me there.

"Human!" it shouted in English, pointing at me.

Oh, crap. I lost all my invisibility stuff when he did.

He was scrambling to get up and so was I. Suddenly two energy beams intersected him from the sky, and the satyr burned away as every demon does when they die.

I hastily went invisible again, as did Anthy, who was hovering overhead. The door opened again, and I imagined some other demon looking out to see what the disturbance was. After a tense moment the door closed again, but I still didn't move. After all, the figure could be on the other side of the door, or this side. While I was sitting there on the ground I pulled another ignore ward out of my pouch and slapped it on. As I was doing that to myself I didn't become visible again, and after about five minutes of waiting (which seemed longer) the door opened again and closed again.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Great, maybe now something is out rather than the thing I thought had come out going back in. This is nuts!

I waited another minute and stood back up, carefully feeling my way over to where Osman and Elizabeth were still holding hands.

“I think we’re in the clear,” I said to them.

“Kat wants to apologize, hearing the demon tongue did something to her and she was out of it. Otherwise she would have helped.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kat. I wish I knew where my other self was, but this is the only door. I don’t want to run into him too. We aren’t making any progress just standing here, though. Shall we risk the door?”

“Why not try the phase again?” suggested Osman. “They wouldn’t put it on the inside too, would they?”

“Depends on how paranoid they are. I can feel it out, come on.”

I walked them over to the wall next to the door and activated my talisman. I didn’t feel any resistance, and my hand slid through the wall to the inside.

“Okay, I can get through. I’m going to peek through.” I leaned forward and stuck my head through the wall, but realized now why they hadn’t bothered locking people out of this place.

It was pitch black.

“Okay, how do we see in the dark?” I asked, pulling my head back out. “They probably have a spell, or can see in the dark naturally for all I know. Anyone have any ideas?”

“Wow, wish I had learned the bat spirit, of all things, now. Huh.”

“I know. Usually I have my knife, but that’s kind of obvious now.”

“Just a second, Kat wants to talk to me,” Osman said. “Even if you did that, how would you know what you were looking for? We’re supposed to be finding out what they’re doing in there, and that skill won’t tell you that. What secrets room? Are you sure? Okay. Kat says there’s a room in this place that feels more concealing than the others. She says she can take us there, and see what she can find.”

“Good enough for me,” I said. “Lead the way.”

Osman led us inside, and my vision suddenly got... weirder.

“I’m putting an illusion inside your brain that corresponds to what I’m sensing in the room,” said a very clear Katrina. “It’s the best I can do. Doing both is kind of difficult. Come on, the room I want to check is this way.”

We went past what seemed to be tables and chairs, even a kitchen, guided by Katrina's visions. We came to a room past several closed doors and Osman whispered that this was it. It seemed to be a small room, but filled with weapons. Katrina couldn't tell what kind of weapons, but she could sense they were all very dangerous.

"Over here, she thinks this is a safe. She's going to disconnect the illusion, she needs the brainpower to crack it open."

"What's she going to do? We can't leave any trace we were here!"

"I think she means crack it like, actually figure out the combination somehow..."

"Okay. You'll need to touch it, right?"

"Yes."

"Ask her if we're standing inside anything. I don't want to drop the phase if we're going to get cut in half by a table."

"She says we're fine. The weapons are along the walls."

"Got it." I dropped the phase, but whispered to Elizabeth. "Don't take anything down, it could be alarmed somehow. But if you want to carefully feel for the weapons, that should be safe enough. Just don't move."

"Okay."

Osman spent a moment touching the safe, and I heard the dial spinning. It was very freaky, being in the dark with an unknown number of demons wandering around, but I knew at any moment I could grab everyone, phase, and drag them back through the place into the light. The safe handle was moved and I heard it opening.

Osman shuffled some papers, and reported what Katrina could tell about them.

"They seem to be instruction manuals for weapons," he reported.

"Yeah, guns," I said, having touched several on the walls.

"What? Guns? Are you sure?"

"Very sure. Anything else of importance in the safe?"

"She says one of the books is about killing a lot of people at once. Something about explosions. Vehicle manuals of some kind too. Do you think these demons are planning something?"

"Why else would they go through all this trouble? But guns?"

"I know. Okay, she's closing the safe up again. Let's get out of here before someone comes."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

I grabbed everyone, phased again, and we made our way back to the boulder.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

The others were already back, having been defeated by the darkness.

“We didn’t get much, but hopefully it’s enough for the simurgh. Let’s go before they notice that one demon is missing.”

“You killed something in there?” asked Nikko.

“Couldn’t be helped. We... ran into him. They all wander around invisible anyway, so hopefully it’ll be some time before they figure out he’s gone.”

“I hope so.”

I put the spirit of hummingbird on Yasui again, and resolved to look into that ward Mr DeLefeu always used to teleport us. It seemed wards were more handy than I first believed!

We got back to the forest without incident with our guide, and a simurgh, who I hoped was the same one as before, came out to meet us.

“How did you make out?” it asked.

“They like keeping their secrets there,” I said. “But I can sketch the place out for you.”

I told them about the practice yard, and the lengths they went to in order to protect the place. The simurgh didn’t seem surprised when mentioned the safe room and the guns. It was disappointed by the fact it couldn’t directly see into Kat’s mind to share her impressions.

“I’m sorry, she never picked up that skill,” said Osman. “And if you initiated it with me, I would be the mind you would be going into. And I don’t know anymore about it then what we told you.”

“Pity. Still, it makes clear some disturbing rumors we’ve been hearing. It’s nice to get confirmation we were right. You’ve earned your fruit. Take it, and depart in peace.”

“What confirmations?” asked Christina. “What rumors? Are they planning some kind of attack?”

“Oh, were you holding out on your friends?” asked the simurgh. “You have information you would like to trade for the answers to those questions?”

Christina sputtered, but looked away.

“Ah, I see. Come back if you ever do!”

The simurgh went back into the forest, probably to share the news we had brought back. I picked a fruit and slipped it into my pouch. I also noticed these creatures lost their feathers, as the ground around here was littered with them. I thought I heard something about their properties so I gathered up a couple of handfuls of them and when no simurgh ran out to stop me, put them in the pouch too.

“All right, let’s get back.”

Naturally I used analysis on the fruit before I handed it over to Jose so he could give it to this girl he had to placate. The fruit itself was sort of like a pear, but bigger. We formed a square around Jose and went looking for her. It was getting late, but we managed to find her, and Jose handed the thing over.

Instantly, his clothes were back.

“Thank you guys so much!” he said, as the girl looked at her fruit with disbelief. “If you ever need the services of a really crappy soul wielder, I’m your man. But tell me, now that the curse is broken, what did it actually do?”

“My friend,” I said, clapping him on the shoulder, “you don’t want to know.”

“Why soma fruit?” asked Christina.

“Oh,” replied the girl, a bit shocked. “We had just been talking about it in class, and that was the first thing that came to mind. I wanted to try it.”

“Right. Well, next time, hold off on the curses if you know what’s good for you. We covered for you this time, but next time, I won’t be so forgiving.”

“I regretted it almost immediately after I said it,” said the girl, looking down. “But I couldn’t just drop it, all my friends would have hated me!”

“I guess we all learned something then.”

What the girl did with the fruit I don’t know, but I later turned some apples from the cafeteria into it, for us to try. It tasted good, but didn’t seem to make me any less hungry than the normal fruit would have. I guessed I could copy the flesh of the fruit, but not the spiritual power of it. Still, it was something different.

We also told Mr DeLefeu we were back, and thanked him for providing the “guide.”

Yasui then went down to the whiteboard and wrote under “Solved Cases”

The Case of the Fruity Mystic.

Quality Craftsmanship

You think Jesus was a good carpenter?

I mean the bible doesn't really address it... -- Jim Gaffigan

Our next case came to us a scant few weeks after the second, in the first week of November. The weather was starting to turn cold, which meant a return of longer skirts, heavier leggings and thicker jackets.

Yes, I noticed. I may be focused on schoolwork but not to the exclusion of all else.

And I was focused on schoolwork again. I had been falling behind, playing with magic and such, so I set all that aside and concentrated on my history and chemistry and ancient languages classes. At first it seemed a bit silly to make a person that could do actual alchemy stuff, even to the extent I could, take a chemistry class. I later realized it was a good chance to use analysis on various substances and learn more about the physical world. After all, it didn't take much cesium to cause a bucket of water to actually explode, and even I could manage to change a stone into a few grams of the stuff. So my grades started to rise again, much to my relief.

What bummed me out during this time was the fact I hadn't made any new talismans in so long. There were two reasons for this, the first studying took up most of my time and two, that weird loss of potential my artificer teachers were always talking about. I didn't need to make learning how to recognize Latin anymore difficult than it already was.

I did however pick up that teleport ward. I had to appeal directly to Mr DeLefeu, as it was only taught to 4th year students and even then, only select ones they thought would use it properly. I argued I could already teleport using the hummingbird spirit, this would just make sure more accidents like finding yourself in the middle of a mountain didn't happen. He

asked me where I had learned the hummingbird, as that spirit wasn't taught until that same time, and I had to admit that in the two and a half years of picking up various bits of knowledge I had forgotten. I had probably asked someone and they had shown me, as he insisted that ritual wasn't listed in any of the books in the library. I took his word for it.

When the door to the club opened this time, it was a girl, and sadly for us guys in the room she was fully clothed.

Shouldn't the scales be balanced? Why do just the girls get it?

I recognized her as a fellow artificer, and she looked quite nervous. "It's Devona, right?" I asked.

"Hi, Dean," she replied, looking around at us sitting and doing homework. She was a year younger than me, and had very dark skin. Her hair was super frizzy but she didn't speak with an accent, so she must be from some English speaking country. I never had asked where she was from.

"Come to see what the Helping People Club is all about?" asked Elizabeth.

"Actually, I'm here for some help, I think."

"You think?"

"It's... I don't know, maybe I should just forget it."

"You came in here," said Christina. "You might as well tell us why."

"I heard you helped that naked kid a couple of weeks ago, so I thought maybe you could help me?"

"Not until we know what your problem is," said Osman. "Would you care to sit down? I'm Osman."

She reluctantly came over and took Osman's chair, which he offered to her after sweeping up his books.

"Thanks. My problem started yesterday. Remember last year, Dean, when I came to you for advice on a talisman? And you said never rush it, you'll just screw it up and regret it."

"It sounds like something I would say. So you rushed one and messed it up, right?"

"It was for a test, I left it way too late and I needed to get it done. So... yeah."

She lapsed into silence.

"I'm guessing it went bad?" I prompted. "If it had just fizzled, you would have just started again. Unless you're asking me to make it again for you, which you know is impossible."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“No, nothing like that!” she said quickly. “No, it, uh, went bad.”

“What do you mean, went bad?” asked Elizabeth.

“Let me give you an example,” I answered. “Take a ward.” I got one out of my pouch. “I rush this and mess it up, nothing happens, right? I’ve put so little energy and time into it, the paper just burns up and that’s the end of it. But talismans are a little different. They take material components, in my case the special ink, and a lot more time and effort. You’re effectively binding a power into an object, something that really isn’t natural. If it goes bad it can fail in one of two ways. You can just screw it up totally and it becomes worthless, or you can screw it up subtly and get some kind of unexpected result. Which I’m guessing is what happened, because otherwise you wouldn’t be here.”

Devona nodded. “I was trying to make a ring I could activate and make anyone attacking me be afraid, so they would just run away. I’m not big on combat.”

“I know what you mean,” said Osman. “Dean made this for me, maybe you could do something similar?” He showed her his hand.

“It’s not a question of weapons or anything. It just freaks me out, if something is in my face actually trying to kill me. And that’s just from our practice sessions in health class. Thinking about facing a real demon gives me nightmares.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I reassured her. “You’re not a, no offense Yasui, true martial artist. You can do plenty from behind the scenes or behind any combat line you find yourself in.”

“None taken,” said Yasui.

“I know. But that’s what I was making, figuring it would keep me pretty safe.”

“So what happened?”

“I’m not sure. I activated it to test how it would work when my roommate was in the room, figuring it would be funny to watch her freak out and be totally afraid of me. But she just stood there with this weird look on her face. I figured I had botched it and would just have to show that I had tried, so I kept the ring on. I mean I paid for it and I didn’t want to lose it, did I?”

“About an hour later I went to take a shower, and my roommate said she would come with me. She never does that. I mean we’re friends but she usually goes later when it’s not so crowded. Of course then she has trouble getting up in the mornings but I thought maybe she was finally taking some of my advice instead of just ignoring it. I mean she’s really nice and everything and I think

of her as a friend but nothing more than that, I mean nothing had ever happened between us. I mean, you know, like... not that there's anything wrong with that and maybe just to see what it was like, if she had asked... um... I'm sort of rambling..."

"Please, go on," I said. "This story is taking a turn for the better, somehow."

"Or you could leave it at that," said Osman. "I'm supposed to be a holy man!"

"You're also carrying your twin sister around with you," remarked Christina. "Face it, you're never getting a date, ever. All you have is imagination, and despite what bible thumpers would have you believe, thought is not a crime."

"And you've never really worried about it before," remarked Yasui. "What brought this on?"

"Perhaps we should let, Devona, was it? Get back to her story. Expressing my views to the group is all well and good, but I must keep up appearances for guests."

Yasui and Christina gave each other a knowing look, and Yasui invited her to continue.

"Where was I? The shower, right. I went down and she was walking really close to me, you know? And I was busy thinking about that so I didn't really pay any attention to everyone else, who was looking at me really strangely. Not like 'oh I can't believe those two are walking so close together' but like 'oh I wish I was walking next to her like that.' You see what I mean?"

"I'm beginning to. Go on."

"So we showered- separately- and went back to the dorm. Nothing happened that night, but I did catch her looking at me while I was getting dressed the next morning. That day people seemed a little nicer to me, which I thought was nice. I showed my failed ring and told Mrs Chadwick what I had attempted, and that it hadn't worked. She invited me to try again, and said I would only receive one letter grade lower than I normally would have if I got it done sometime soon. I thanked her, thinking about how lucky I was not to have just gotten a 0 for that assignment. She kept looking at me all through class, too. But again I didn't think too much of it.

"This continued for two days. People were going out of their way to be nice to me, and my roommate was seriously checking me out. So three days after I activated it I'm sitting there working on the replacement, right? I'm pretty absorbed in the work, I want to get it right this time. I was pretty

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

sure I knew where I had screwed it up before. If I had been a little more careful I probably would have succeeded, even rushing it like I did. It was a dumb mistake.”

She paused. We all waited, wondering where this was going.

Finally she continued. “My roommate suddenly announced she wasn’t going to wait anymore, threw me onto the bed, and just started, um... attacking me.” Her cheeks were red, even through her dark skin.

“Attacking you? With a weapon?” asked Yasui.

“I mean... Kissing me and stuff.” Devona looked down. “I knew I should have just left this alone,” she muttered.

Yasui and Christina smirked at each other. Elizabeth seemed interested, while Osman was shocked.

“Okay, so it had the opposite effect then?” I asked knowingly. “It built up power over time and instead of making people afraid of you, it made them fall for you.”

She gave an almost imperceptible nod.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of. And you-” I stifled a laugh. “Got to try something new. Isn’t that what school is all about?”

“Or did you just throw her off?” asked Elizabeth, leaning forward a little.

“No, I... I didn’t know what to think. It had happened so fast, and she was like an animal I just went with- do we have to talk about this part?”

Then I did laugh. “So what happened in the morning?”

“It was afterword, actually. She finally dropped off and I realized it was the ring. I took it off and threw it into my jewelry box. Then I slept in her bed. Not that there was much point by then.”

“Was she the same in the morning?” asked Christina.

“No. She was mortified. I tried explaining things to her but she wouldn’t listen. She just ran off. I haven’t seen her since, and that was this morning.”

“So, it wore off once you stopped touching the ring. That’s good, it isn’t permanent. I assume you took it to a teacher or destroyed it yourself somehow?”

Devona shook her head. “If I could have done that I wouldn’t need you guys! After she left I went to destroy it, that thing is obviously too dangerous to leave lying around. But it was gone from the jewelry box!”

There was a pause.

“Could your roommate have taken it?” asked Yasui.

“She didn’t know, and she started crying when she woke up. That’s what woke me up. She wouldn’t have had time.”

“So someone knew about it and when you took it off, they came in and stole it. Super. Well, first things first. We need to find your roommate and smooth things over there. The ring can wait, it’s just a thing. Katrina, you’re our best hope here, can you manage it?”

Hold please, she sent to us.

“Okay, while we wait, what power types does she have? That could make a difference if we’re going to find her. She can’t turn invisible or anything, can she?”

But Devona was looking around. “What do you mean while we wait? Which one of you is Katrina? Why didn’t you answer? How are you-”

“It’s a long story,” said Yasui. “I’m Yasui, by the way, in case you didn’t catch that. And this is Christina and Elizabeth. Don’t worry, someone is on the case.”

“Oh, if you say so. What was the question again?”

“What powers does she have?”

She gave a great sigh. “She’s a... petitioner.”

I closed my eyes. “Naturally. Why wouldn’t she be?” I opened them again. “Osman, you’re our link to the Heavens. What would you be feeling if I... and I realize this is way, way out of the realm of possibility, but just suppose I made a cursed object which forced you to... to, uh, you know? All. Night. Long.” I growled at him and made kitty paws with my hands.

“Katrina says stop that, she can’t concentrate when she’s laughing so hard.”

Yasui and Christina started laughing, but Elizabeth was just looking off into space thoughtfully.

“Sorry. But the question remains.”

“I would probably feel I betrayed the Heavens, even though intellectually I would know- but would I? She didn’t know about the ring, so I wouldn’t either. I would think I had just been overcome with lust for another man. The bible sort of frowns on that sort of thing, you know?”

“And it’s all due to a misinterpretation, sadly.”

“What?” asked Devona.

“Let’s see, there must be a bible around here somewhere...” I scanned the classroom. “Ah, here it is. Leviticus, 18:22: ‘Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination.’ See, they’re talking about being truthful. It’s the Bro Code. You know, don’t lie to your bro like you lie to your-”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“You better not finish that sentence,” said Christina.

Elizabeth laughed. “You’ve been waiting years to say that line, haven’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Anyway,” said Osman. “Depending on how devout I was feeling, putting myself in her shoes, I might immediately go to the chapel and try to beg forgiveness. Or I might go hide someplace out of shame. I probably wouldn’t try to petition anything for advice, for fear it wouldn’t work. Matt tells me that guardian angels aren’t big on speaking up to their charges. If they’re asked a question, they’ll respond, but they won’t volunteer anything.”

“What is Heaven’s policy in this matter?” asked Elizabeth.

“They’re big on free will,” he said carefully. “In this case, her free will was suspended. In fact, I’d probably go so far as to say they would judge that Devona raped her roommate by her actions. So she would be the sinner, and her roommate the victim. Now some religions would see them both as equally guilty and stone them both or whatever, but the Heavens themselves wouldn’t blame her. I think.”

“Wait a minute, I’m a rapist?” said Devona hotly. “It was the cursed object! I didn’t know!”

“But you can’t really prove that,” countered Osman. “You could be lying to me, or yourself. You may or may not have guessed the power of the ring, or maybe you botched it on purpose so this would happen and you could have an excuse. And you let it happen, right? They judge actions more than intent.”

Devona looked very offended.

“This is getting a bit off topic,” I said quickly. “I just wanted to make sure we weren’t dealing with someone that would be hard to find. She won’t. Therefore, we can move this discussion to another time.” I slid my hands like I was moving a block of something.

“At least the ring itself shouldn’t be hard to find,” remarked Yasui. “Just look for the person with the crowd of people hanging around them.”

“Yeah, but if it goes that far,” I countered, “we get into, uh, nighttime territory. We don’t want a repeat of what happened here.”

Osman put up a finger. “Just a second. Okay. Kat says she can’t get a fix on her. It’s harder if you don’t know the person. Do you have a picture of her?”

“Not on me. Come on, we’ll go up to the dorm, there are some pictures up there. But I still don’t see who you’re talking about.”

We went up to the dorms and Devona let us into her room. Clothes were all over, probably where they had been thrown the night before. Otherwise it was the typical girl's dorm room. Tiny, cramped, and with posters of boy bands on the walls. Though one side of the room had more religious iconography than the other.

"Here, this is her," said Devona, showing a picture of a family set in a frame on the desk.

"Great," said Osman, picking up a small statue of Jesus that was set nearby. "Let's see what we can get now."

We all waited as Kat did another seeing, after only five minutes announcing she was getting an image of wilderness.

"So she's not in the chapel then," Yasui said. "Figures she would take the running away option."

"But at least she's still on the island. Did you get more a woodsy vibe or a cavern vibe?" asked Christina.

"Woodsy," Osman answered.

"Okay. We've got probably two hours until dark, let's get out there and find her."

"Wait a second, this is perfect!" said Osman. "I just learned this angel, too. Won't be a second!"

"You want the-"

Osman shook his head. "Even I can get this one on my own."

He spent about a minute praying, and suddenly two weird looking crows popped into the room. They were about the size of a phoenix, and like the phoenix were a brilliant red color. However, they had a third leg in the middle of their bodies, which I imagined would give them an odd gait if they walked. They looked around interestedly.

"Greeting, sun crows," said Osman formally. "I was wondering if the two of you might help me."

They looked at each other.

"Oh, hey," the one greeted the other.

"Hi!" said the other, back.

"What can we do for you?" they both said to Osman.

Osman put the statue back where it was and picked up the picture, holding it out to them. "This girl has run off, we think into the forest, and we would like to track her down before dark. Can you help?"

"Seems easy enough. I'll just need to get a quick reading of her spiritual energy, which should be all over this place if it's her room..." The bird paused. "Uh, not to be rude or anything, but could, uh..." he looked us all

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

over. “Just about all of you go far, far away? You’re messing up my spirit sense. Man, kids today are born with so much energy!”

“Uh, no offense,” said the other, looking at Osman.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s let these fine, uh, gentleman? Ladies? get on with their work. Come get us if you guys locate her before we do.”

“Oh, not to worry, we’ll be able to find you,” said the one.

“With our eyes closed and a broken wing.”

We went down the hall so the birds could do whatever it was they were doing, and discussed what we were going to do.

“I say split up,” said Yasui. “We can get enough forces here to comb the forest by ourselves. The drag won’t matter, she won’t be attacking us.”

“True. Okay, we can all send some kind of signal into the air when someone spots her. Let’s do this.”

We headed out, Devona looking more confused than ever. But her mind really got blown when both of us made 4 clones, and Elizabeth called out Anthy, who split into three spirit projections. So in total sixteen “people” headed out the door and towards the forest. Devona stared at us.

“I guess you weren’t kidding. Her name is Isadora, by the way.”

Where in heck do you have to be from to get named Isadora?

We spread out, and shortly Osman, riding a koma-inu and tailing the two birds, went by overhead.

“Cheater!” I shouted after him, but I doubt he heard me. I was actually glad he had somewhat gotten over his fear of petitioning things, and was willing to do so when the situation warranted. Of course, he was sticking to petitioning “beasts” of Heaven rather than actual angels, but still, it was an improvement.

I was quite shocked when, not two minutes later, one of the yata-garasu came back to me. We had hardly penetrated the forest by this time, spreading out until we could just see each other. That way there weren’t any gaps and we could just basically knock the forest over in a big line in our search. It wasn’t that big, after all.

“We found her,” said the Sun Crow.

“Wow, you guys are good at what you do!”

“Thanks. It’s a talent. Pull yourself together and follow me.”

I dismissed my clones and the crow flew over, getting everyone else together and then leading us to Devona’s roommate.

Osman was trying to talk her down, literally, as she was up a tree.

She was also only wearing a nightgown, probably something she grabbed when she ran out of the room this morning. Given what she had been doing with her roommate, I doubted she had slept in anything the night before.

Poor girl must be freezing, out here in the cold all day.

“Please, come down and we can talk about this!” Osman was shouting. “I’m a petitioner too, we can straighten this out.”

She just pulled her legs in tighter against her body and squeezed her eyes shut more. I saw she had reddish hair, long, and very nice legs.

“This isn’t working,” said Christina.

“She must be freezing and hungry,” I said. “I’ll jump up there and-”

“You’ll jump up there?” asked Yasui. “Excuse me, but I think this needs a woman’s touch, if you don’t mind? Plus I can get up there way easier than you.”

“Sorry, I guess I tend to do that, don’t I? Just assume I’m the only one that can do anything. Have to watch that. Of course, you should go. Here.”

I got out a creation ward, turning it into a blanket, and pulled out a flask of aqua vitae I had made... gee, when had I made this stuff? I looked at it, holding the bottle by the neck. It was a sort of chemist tapered jar, with the bulbous bottom and skinny neck.

This stuff doesn’t go bad, does it? I shook it a little bit, sloshing the liquid inside around. I remembered botching it several times before I finally got two that worked out. *Eh, probably not.*

I handed them both over, and Yasui jumped into the tree. She must have misjudged the distance or something, because almost immediately she shouted “Oh no, I’m falling!” and started pinwheeling her arms. The girl looked up, jumped up and grabbed her.

“So you do still care,” said Yasui, throwing the blanket over her. “That’s nice to know.”

“I couldn’t let you fall,” said Isadora. “Wait, did you trick me?”

“You’ve been tricked enough for one day,” she said. “I just wondered if you would save me or let me fall. Now I know. So you haven’t given up on life, or on helping people. Now here, drink this. I’m not sure what it is, but a good friend of mine made it so I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I am thirsty. I guess it doesn’t do anyone any good to remain that way.” She took the bottle and uncorked it, then drank it down. She looked surprised. “I’m not thirsty anymore, but it didn’t seem like nearly enough. And I’m not hungry, either. Thank you.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Don’t thank me, thank Dean.”

“Dean?” She looked down, and I waved up at her. “All part of the service, miss,” I said.

In response she shrieked, dropped the glass (which thankfully Kat seemed to catch, as it floated down gently) and pulled the blanket around herself. “Boys!” she yelled down at us.

Hey, you’re the one standing there showing us everything- hey, I guess the universe does balance itself. How about that!

“So come down here and you can go back to your room and get some clothes on. That blanket won’t last forever, it’s a ward, you know.”

“Come on,” said Yasui, holding out a hand. “Let’s get you down and talk about this. Your roommate told us what she did. You’re the victim here, not the guilty party.”

“But what I did-”

“Wasn’t your fault. Come down and we can explain.”

She finally agreed, and Yasui grabbed her up and jumped down out of the tree.

“Sorry, fastest way down,” she said, putting Isadora back on her feet.

“That’s fine.”

Devona seemed torn between embracing her roommate and just bolting for the hills herself. “It’s all my fault,” she blurted. “If you don’t believe me, ask him.” She pointed to me. “He’s like... I don’t even know, I’ve seen him do some things that can’t be all talismans. And that liquid was alchemy, right? But his pin is an artificer like me. Maybe you’ll believe him.”

“I’m willing to listen, but I know my own heart,” said Isadora sadly.

“I beg to differ, in this case,” I said. “Your behavior was overridden by a botched talisman Devona made. It was affecting everyone, but you spent the most time in her presence, so you were hit the hardest. It wasn’t you, anyone in your situation would have done what you did. Young, old, man, woman, didn’t matter. Actually I’m glad there aren’t any younger kids around, that really would have been a disaster. Or if you were being given extra lessons by a teacher-”

“Oh, thank you so much,” said Devona. “Make it worse, why don’t you?”

“I’m just saying it could have been worse, that’s all. Look, I can’t prove it to you, but you can prove it to yourself. petition something. The Heavens won’t have abandoned you over this.”

“But what if you’re wrong?”

“I can prove it,” said Osman, having said thank you to the petitioned angels and dismissed them. We all looked over at him. “Better get out the item,” he said to me. “They aren’t all that easy and I don’t want to be out here for ten minutes.”

I shrugged and got out my circle, placing it on the ground. Osman stepped into it, and started to pray.

“I’m sorry this happened, Isadora,” said Devona. “I know you’ll probably never trust me again, but I swear- no more rushing talismans. I’ll take my time from now on, I promise. No more screwups like that.”

“It really was something you did?”

“Yes,” she said, sounding relieved that Isadora was beginning to believe her. “It was supposed to make anything around me afraid, but instead it made everything around me start, you know, lusting after me, I guess.”

“I suppose if you went to a nightclub it could come in handy,” she said, looking down.

“It got stolen.”

“You’re kidding!”

She shook her head. “Right out of my jewelry box. I know I threw it in there, but it’s gone. We went after you first, we’ll look for it next.”

“To think of something like that in the wrong hands...”

Suddenly, a shining ball of light appeared in the clearing, and still somehow managed to look startled.

“Greetings,” said a voice from somewhere inside the glowing sphere. “Just a moment, please.” It shimmered, and a simple looking angel stood there, looking around. “This should be interesting,” it said.

“Holy virtue,” said Osman. “I crave a boon. Please, read the soul of this girl and tell her she is not tainted by her recent actions, that were out of her control.”

“Were they?” asked the angel.

“Yes!” we all insisted.

“Okay, okay. I get the picture, no need to shout.” The angel went over and looked Isadora over. “You are no more tainted by sin than anyone else your age would be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean- I mean, holy virtue, can you be more specific?”

“I don’t think so. Are you worried about something in particular?” We told him the short version of the story, and he nodded. “I see your predicament. Your feelings do you credit, but there is something you must

understand. You are *souls*.” He looked us all over. “You have a flesh envelope, true, but you are no more that envelope than you are the food you eat. When you perish and hopefully return to your true home after a life of virtue, you will again become pure spiritual energy. This is as the All-Father has decreed. What does it matter what your envelope does to another envelope? You are in here,” he put a finger on Isadora’s chest. “Not here.” He took one of her fingers in his. “Your gender on this Earth is meaningless, merely the All-Father’s tool for furthering your species. Honestly, the things you humans get hung up on.”

“But then- The bible-”

“Was written by narrow minded men,” admonished the virtue, “in another time. As were all holy documents written by all religions across the world. Some have snippets of Heavenly doctrine in their pages, others do not. Live as you feel you must. The bible says do not kill, but then commands a man who picks up sticks on the Sabbath day to be stoned to death. Does the man who throws a stone follow or break the All-Father’s law?”

“But if that’s the case, everyone can just justify any actions they make as doing the right thing and get away with it!”

“Until they are judged, yes.” He sighed. “The subject is complex, and I’m not sure this is really the setting.” He looked around the forest which was growing darker. “You can petition me yourself, if you wish further discourse on the subject. My name is Paltellon. All you need to know right now is that your act was not of your own volition, and even if it was, would not be sinful if not forced upon your roommate.”

“Oh. Thank you, I just might do that,” said Isadora.

“Her own volition?” asked Devona. “No, it was the talisman for sure, if that’s what you mean. It really surprised me, you know?”

Both girls blushed and looked away from each other.

“As for you, Dean,” he said, turning to look at me.

“You know who I am?”

He chuckled. “When a human is given access to magic that knowledge doesn’t stay among one type of celestial being for long. We have great hopes for you. I hope you don’t let us down.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. If there is nothing else?”

“Thank you, Paltellon,” said Osman, dismissing him.

“Let’s go back,” said Devona. “Are we... okay?”

“I guess. I have some more thinking to do about souls and flesh and sinning and what not. Come on.”

Later, after Isadora was dressed and warm and we all got something to eat (she wouldn't need to for 24 hours, of course) Kat tried several times to find the ring.

We took the problem to a seer I knew, and gave him a description of the ring and a drawing I worked up from what Devona told me. But he came up empty too.

“What does that mean?” asked Devona.

“It means it's in a lead box or not on the Earth anymore. Or it's behind some kind of ward, but I don't feel anything pushing me away, it's just not there. Sorry.”

And viewing the hours between when Devona went to sleep and woke up with the time frame wasn't helpful either. (The girls were very careful not to let it go back too far, which I thought was a real pity.) A figure, dressed in thick, loose, black robes from head to toe so it was impossible to tell if they were human, demon or otherwise appeared in the room suddenly. It got dark instantly and in seconds the darkness, the figure, and the ring were gone.

Yasui reluctantly put “The Case of the Lustful Ring” in between the “Solved” and “Unsolved” line on the whiteboard.

The Helping People Club had its first failure.

Summoning Catastrophe

*They may be faceless minions,
but they're my faceless minions!*

A scant three weeks had passed when the next case came in. It was a boy I had seen in some of my classes, but didn't have any contact with. By his pin he was a demon artist, a power type I had never attempted learning any skills from. They had an actual link to a demon at birth, that they could draw power and techniques from, that I lacked. They could also create connections to other demons, and start using their powers too. Of course there was a down side, as their soul was partly demonic they were harmed by holy power and couldn't stand to be near holy chosen. They could be the most pious people on Earth and it still wouldn't matter, a holy chosen would burn them just by touch.

Of course, I could do most of what they could do on my own, so I didn't need to bother. I didn't even know his name. Which brought up an uncomfortable feeling in my mind. *Do I just ignore people who I think can't teach me anything?* But of course, no one could be friends with everybody, and I doubt Christina was worried about snubbing even her fellow spirit energists, so it probably wasn't a concern. Still, it was something to consider.

I had heard him talk in class, and he still wasn't completely fluent in English, and spoke with an Indian accent. He was about my height, and had his hair cut pretty short. There was something unusual about him, but I couldn't put my finger on it. I chalked it up to his being a demon artist, but there were other Artists that didn't seem to give off that weird vibe. Still, he could have some other spiritually related thing going on, who could tell just by sight around here?

“Welcome to the Helping People Club,” said Elizabeth, as always the fastest to greet someone. “Now with a 7/9th track record, but don’t let that scare you off. We’re ready to help!”

“Oh, well,” said the boy, “seven ninths? Forget it then.” He turned to leave.

“Wait, would you believe 3/5ths?”

The boy paused, thinking. “Isn’t that less?”

“Wait, is it? I don’t know, math isn’t my best subject.”

“Not your best subject, eh? Then would you mind explaining why you have those *Penrose Tiles!!!*”

We all stared at him blankly, looking about the room but not getting any clues.

“Not Angry Flower fans, huh? Oh, never mind,” he said. “I’m Achintya. I’ve seen some of you around, and hopefully you’ve seen me around. I need some help, or more accurately, I’ve been sent here to see if someone else can get your help.”

“Sent? They couldn’t come here themselves? We have a strict confidentiality agreement. Whatever their problem is, as long as it’s not illegal, no one else will find out about it from us.”

“That’s not exactly the case. They’re here now, just not in a form you would recognize. You don’t have any prejudice against demons, do you?”

“I accept that they must be allowed to exist, as part of the All-Father’s plan for humanity. I wouldn’t want to buddy up with one, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I’m asking would you hear one out or just attack on sight?”

“I guess it’s never come up. What do you say, fellow members? Do we hear out anyone, whether angel, demon or human?”

“I think demons can’t be trusted not to follow their instincts,” said Elizabeth. “I vote no demons.”

“I agree,” said Osman. “Demons are dangerous and don’t belong here.”

“That’s two against. Yasui?”

“I think we should hear out anyone,” she said, then stuck her tongue out at Elizabeth.

“Christina?”

“I think something is happening in the demon world. Something new. I think unless we get some contacts there we might be caught by surprise when whatever is being planned starts happening. I say we hear them out.”

“And so the vote is tied. It is a helping *people* club, but we did help

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

out the Heavens, indirectly, through Bennu. And doing good, even if a demon requests it, would count in our favor.”

“How could a demon want to do anything good?” asked Elizabeth.

“Perhaps it would only be what is good for that demon itself, but perhaps along the way some good might be done incidentally. I’ll at least hear him out. Elizabeth, Osman, if you wish to leave, none here at the club will say more about it.”

“I’ll stay,” grumped Elizabeth.

“I want to make sure he doesn’t try anything,” said Osman.

“Every well. We will not attack, and hear this demon out,” I said to Achintya. “You say they are already here...”

“Yes. Just a moment.” He lifted his shirt.

Aw man, the girls get it again? It just isn’t fair!

But he stopped at just showing his belly button, which seemed to explode with lightning, and a giant cat like form stood there, glowering at us. It must have been a demon lord, as it stood twice as tall as we did, and looked like a tiger standing on hind legs. However, it had the mane of a lion and a calculating glint in his eyes.

“Lord Nagatobimaru, the group you requested to see. Everyone, may I present the lord of all raiju, Storm Rider, Bringer of Lightning and Fire, Rider of Winds, Lord Nagatobimaru.”

“Laying it on a bit thick, aren’t we?” he said gruffly. “I could still change my mind again and decide to eat you.”

“You know you couldn’t take me,” said Achintya lightly. “Since I got this,” he showed a tattoo on his upper arm. “You can’t summon me like you did before, so you’d have to face me in actual combat. And I shut down Adramalech, what chance do you think you have? Now, are you going to tell these people your problems or not?”

“Fine, fine.” He looked us all over. “Interesting bunch. Who’s the leader of this merry band of misfits?”

Everyone looked to me.

“Ah, the guy with the strangest energy, of course. Here’s the short version of my problem. Someone is killing my subordinates!”

“Okay,” I said after a moment. “My guess is you don’t know who, or else you would be cutting them down to size right now rather than standing in the human world talking to me.”

“Hey, he does have some intelligence. This may work out after all. Here’s the details. Since this school year started my followers have been

disappearing. I finally noticed about a month and a half ago when I called a meeting of all my subordinates and noticed how many were gone. I had heard reports of raiju going missing but we're not a close knit bunch like those sappy kamaitachi. Board games, honestly? Anyway, with so many coming to me and saying they hadn't heard from so and so since weeks ago I started looking into it. By then nearly everyone had heard about it and were glad I was taking action to stop it.

"Turns out two always disappear at the same time. Even though summoning is random it wasn't hard to work out that two of my subordinates going missing on the same night wasn't coincidence. Once I called everyone together it became perfectly clear they were going missing at exactly the same time. That means someone is summoning them. The question is why they aren't coming back."

"When their summoning is over, they should be returned to their exact position in the demon world, mostly unhurt," I explained to the others. "That they aren't is a concern."

"I think," said Achintya, "it's a rival demon lord. He's summoning them and imprisoning them someplace. When he's captured most of Lord Nagatobimaru's forces he'll attack in earnest."

"I suppose that could be the case," I admitted. "It's plausible. There are ways to keep summoned creatures from going back, both wards and circles. Possibly magic, I suppose, as well."

"There are several problems with that theory though," refuted Nagatobimaru. "One, my compound isn't that heavily guarded in the first place. Like I said, most of the time we're all off doing our own thing. Mostly blowing stuff up." Osman glared at him. "What? It's a living. So if someone wanted to attack, they could pretty easily. Second, why bother with just two at a time? Raiju aren't that hard to summon, after all."

"Maybe that's all they can reasonably deal with at once?" Christina suggested. "Getting into this prison or stasis that keeps them coming back to you?"

Nogatobimaru shook his head. "While we are superb fighters, I can't believe someone that would go to this trouble wouldn't have a plan in place to control them immediately. Two in a couple of days than two again? That's awful slow to steal my army away from me."

"Maybe this demon lord hoped you wouldn't notice!" said Yasui.

"I noticed."

"Very well, but what leads you here? Just the fact that it started when this school year started again?"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“After I gathered my raiju and saw them disappearing as they did, I invited a mystic to trace the connection, while it existed. It pointed this way. We moved closer to the school and when it happened again, it still pointed this way. So it’s got to be happening here.”

Everyone looked at me, but I just shrugged. I didn’t know much about mystic powers, brewing potions and doing curses wasn’t my thing. Alchemy was better. And I was told their other skills wouldn’t be very helpful at the distances they would actually be useful.

“Wait, invited or *invited* this mystic?” asked Achintya.

“Aren’t they the same thing? Anyway, a mystic can almost see the path a demon takes when it’s being summoned. It’s a spirit thing, I don’t know. That brought me here.”

“Now that you mention it, I think seers can do the same thing,” I remarked.

“Maybe. Whatever. The point is, I talked to your so called principal to see about getting it stopped. He said he didn’t know anything about it, and gave me the whole ‘I’ll look into it soon’ shtick. Personally, I don’t believe him.”

“Hey, if he said he was going to do something-” I started.

“Look, kid, not to rain on your parade but your Foundation wants us demons gone, remember? They tolerate cambions and demon artists and the like if they don’t step out of line. But I don’t think a guy like that is going to do me any favors. I suggested Achintya here look into it but he said he was only one man, how did you put it?”

“One man, trying to find the answers to life’s persistent questions. I listen to the radio a lot to improve my English. Sometimes quotes are easier than using original speech.”

“Whatever. He suggested this ‘club’ of yours. I guess rumors are getting around about you being real problem solvers. I hope they’re justified.”

Our eyes quietly rested upon our last case, written on the board between “solved” and “unsolved” and I think everyone had the same thought. *I hope so too.*

“All right,” I said. “We’ll take the case. I don’t want dozens of raiju under some summoner’s control to flood out of some hidden room here someplace.” Elizabeth and Osman both looked sour. “And it’s something odd, like all the rest of the bizarre stuff going on. If this isn’t related to chaos growing in the world, I’ll eat... a vaguely hat shaped pastry of some kind. We need to get to the bottom of it.”

“Thanks,” said Nagatobimaru, turning away. “I’ll stick around until it’s solved then.” He grabbed Achintya’s shirt.

“How are you here, exactly?” asked Osman.

“Demon lords can dimension step,” he answered, and was sucked back into Achintya’s stomach.

“That’s a weird hiding place,” said Elizabeth. “Is he inside you right now?”

“No, raiju can hide in a belly button for some bizarre reason. Don’t ask,” said Achintya. “And while it’s a bellyful of laughs carrying him around, let’s see about solving this quickly, shall we?”

“Don’t you start,” said Christina. “We get enough of that sort of thing around here normally.”

“Shoot, I forgot to ask,” I said. “Are these abductions or whatever they are regular? I mean we can’t just sit around for weeks waiting for someone to summon something.”

“Actually they are,” Achintya answered. “That’s why he’s here now. The next one is scheduled for tonight. They happen six days apart every time, so if you miss this one, it’s almost a week before you can try again.”

“Better get cracking,” I said, standing up. “Loyal minions, wait here. I must go see a man about a talisman. Talk amongst yourselves.”

And so I climbed up to Mr DeLefeu’s office, and knocked on the door. He said to come in, and he looked up from his desk.

“He went and talked to you, didn’t he?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. Yourself? Paperwork isn’t piling up or anything is it? Are you getting enough exercise? Can I get you some coffee?”

“Hello, Dean, how are you?”

“Fine, thanks. Yourself?”

“Fine. With that out of the way then...”

“Yes, he did, actually. He said he didn’t believe you would actually look into it.”

He sighed and put his pen down. “To be perfectly honest I probably wouldn’t. Okay, what do you need? Another guide to the demon world? Access to some hitherto untaught technique here at the school? Forbidden knowledge about some powerful talisman you found in a dusty old book somewhere that you want to try out?”

“Ding Dong!”

“What?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I figure there must be talismans aplenty around the school. In particular I want to know if there’s one that can detect when someone summons something. Someone sleepily summons seven salmon sandwiches suddenly. Try saying that three times fast.”

He gave me a dark look. *Everyone’s a critic.*

“Actually, there is. It has a limited range, but we’ve left some boosters in key points around the island that act as a sort of radio tower for the thing. You really think the summoning is being done here?”

“I believe Nagatobimaru believes that. He doesn’t want his followers dying and did what he could to track down the culprit. But he knows he can’t just wander about the school, now can he?”

“He better not. Okay, but as far I as know, it hasn’t been activated outside of bounds. And I should know. I’ll show you.”

We went down a few floors and he got out his keyring. He opened the door to a broom closet and made sure no one was inside.

“It’s a favorite spot of kids sneaking around to make out,” he said, pulling it closed. “But they don’t know about the surveil wards I put in there.”

I looked with shock at the man standing before me. *Would he do such a thing?*

He gave me a look back that maybe he was joking and maybe he wasn’t. He turned the key and opened the door again, and now there was a strange contraption in the room and no sign of shelves or cleaning supplies at all.

“How-”

“I’m not telling you all the secrets of the school, you know,” he said, stepping inside.

The contraption, set on an ordinary looking table, looked like a globe with only four thin circles of metal making it up. One horizontal, one vertical, and two set on angles. In the center there seemed to be a steel ball floating in air. But it couldn’t have been steel, because from the ball a thin light was shining, hitting the circles at a specific, straight line, point.

“The ball,” he explained, “shows the position of a summoning. As you can see, it’s pointing to the...” he consulted a chart next to the device. “summoning room number 4. See the marks here?” He pointed to the marks on the circles. “That tells us where the summoning is going on. The light shows us the marking, we look up the coordinates, which show direction and distance. As that’s the location of the summoning club, all is well.”

The light from the ball snapped off.

“Ah, you see, they stopped. Now if there was more than one, as there sometimes is, the light would show all the positions.”

“And you can get the whole island with this?”

“We know the coordinates for the classrooms and such. If someone summons off campus this ward here-” he trailed off, looking at the bottom of the device. “It’s gone. My ward is gone, it’s been stolen!”

“So someone other than yourself knows about this room,” I said, as he frantically looked under the table and around the rest of the room.

“Just staff, or so I thought. You don’t think it’s one of the teachers doing this, do you?”

“I would not care to speculate at this time,” I answered carefully. “But do you now agree something odd is going on.”

“Yes. That ward is supposed to warn me if the light hits a non-allowed position. That being the summoning rooms. All right, tell me again what this Nagatobimaru wants.”

I explained about the six day cycle and that it was today, so he immediately grabbed his cell phone and dialed a number.

“Mandara,” he said to the person on the other end, who must be Miss Darjiling, one of the seer teachers. “We have a bit of an issue here. Can you come down to room #12. Yes, there’s been a break in. Right. See you soon.”

“Ah, there’s at least twelve of these rooms!” I remarked.

“Or we just numbered them randomly to throw off nosey people who think they know everything.”

I lapsed into silence.

“Sorry, this sort of thing isn’t supposed to happen. I’m a little on edge and I shouldn’t take it out on you. But you are nosey,” he added with a grin.

“If I wasn’t, I wouldn’t be the person I am today, or know the skills I do.”

“I suppose.”

Mandara arrived a moment later, and Lucian told her what he wanted from her. She nodded, and touched the talisman, concentrating.

“Just a hand,” she said at last. “A gloved hand, and an arm cloaked in black reached through a small portal and grabbed the ward.”

My eyes narrowed.

“You recognize this description?” asked Lucian.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Sounds similar to the being that stole the ring. If it’s the same guy he gets around. If it’s a different guy then all demons are starting to think ahead a lot more or are sharing techniques to avoid detection. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I. All right, if the pattern holds we’ll see where things get summoned the rest of the day. Anything not done in an approved area, we’ll check out.”

“I’ll go get Achintya and the rest of my te- friends.”

“Uh, thanks Dean, but we can handle it from here.”

“Oh, okay. You can come down with me and tell the big, scary demon lord that his assistance isn’t requested and he can just stay out of the way. I’m sure it’ll go down super well.”

His upper lip twitched. “Fine, you can be involved. But this is a school matter.”

“Tell that to him. He believes it’s a raiju matter, as it’s his subjects getting taken away.”

“I’ll be sure and do that.”

So for the rest of the day the Helping People Club hovered nearby waiting for something to happen. Around 10:30 that night the ball shone light on the rings.

“The caves,” shouted Miss Darjiling, who was still on watch. “Something is being summoned at the caves.”

We all jumped up, and Lucian threw a ward to the floor.

“The teachers are going through first,” he said, as several teachers got ready to leap through.

“To protect the idiot doing this or take them into custody?” asked Nagatobimaru, now out again.

“Yes, one of those,” said Lucian, and plunged through himself.

Nagatobimaru snarled, but waited his turn through the small circle that was teleporting us to the caves near the north coast of the island.

When we appeared, two scared looking seniors were pinned to the ground by teachers, while a writhing, shrieking form carried on nearby.

“What is going on here?” demanded Lucian, looking the thing over.

“That’s what I want to know!” growled Nagatobimaru. “Explain yourselves!”

“Lo- Lo- Lord Nagatobimaru,” stuttered the one. “We’re making progress! We will be able to report success soon. Why have you turned us in like this? We are close!”

Nagatobimaru bent down, putting his face directly in front of the boy who spoke. "You're telling me I asked you to do this?"

"Yes, I swear!" said the boy. "You came to me and said the raiju had volunteered for the experiment, that it was a great honor we had been chosen to carry out your work. Please, Lord, don't be angry at us!"

He looked up. "I have never seen these two before in my- why are you pointing that thing at me?" he asked the man brandishing a spear. "Wait a minute, I recognize that spear. Katsunori, is that you?"

"Still up to no good, eh, Tobi-san?" asked the man.

"Wow, you got old," exclaimed Nagatobimaru.

"Yes, I did. I wondered if you would recognize me."

"Has it really been so long? Put it away. You know this-" he pointed at the pathetic creature, still howling in what must be agony, "isn't anything I ever wanted."

Katsunori wavered, but put the spear up. "I believe him."

"What is it?" asked Osman, trying not to look at it. The creature seemed to be made of two raiju, but stuck together haphazardly.

"That, I intend to find out." Nagatobimaru went over to the creature and picked it up almost tenderly.

"Kill me," it managed.

"Forgive me, my followers," he said, and slashed the creature apart with his claws. It vanished. "I just hope, for your sake, they come apart again," he remarked to the still prone summoner boys.

He snapped his fingers, and a raiju appeared. "Yes, my lord?"

"Who just disappeared? Did you see?"

"Yes, my lord. Apatsu and Dekumatchu. You've found the perpetrators, lord? This is excellent news!"

"Yes, you may take this news to the rest of my followers."

"I will. Thank you for looking out for us, lord!"

"Humph." The demon vanished, and Nagatobimaru concentrated again. Two more raiju appeared, screaming. They lay on the floor, howling in agony, but soon quieted and looked up.

"You saved us, lord!" said the one.

"Command us," said the other. "We are yours forever. Thank you."

"Thank you." The first caught sight of the boys. "Are these the ones, lord? May we tear them to pieces for the sins they committed against our kind?"

"Perhaps later. For now I want to know what they thought they were doing, and who impersonated me to begin such a bizarre experiment. I will let you know when the time comes. Return now, and rest."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Thank you,” said both, getting into a bowing position. They too went away.

“Don’t let him hurt us!” said the second boy, speaking at last as Nagatobimaru slowly turned around towards them. “We really thought we were doing his bidding!”

He looked over at Mandara, who nodded.

“I will get to the bottom of this. I promise you that.”

Press Gang
Now impress me.

“So spill it!” Nagatobimaru said menacingly to the two boys, once we were back at the school and seated around a table. His claws dug deep into the wood and made curls around them. “What did this so called duplicate of me want you doing, exactly?”

One of the boys indicated by jerking his head that the other should be the first to speak, but he shook his head and indicated the other should.

“You!” said Nagatobimaru, pointing. “You will speak. Now.”

“Okay, okay. It’s actually, uh, very interesting theoretically. We wouldn’t have actually begun the experiment without you coming to us and telling us it was okay. But the implications if it works...”

“If what works?” asked Lucian, his voice as hard as the demon lord’s beside him.

“Right. Um, well, you’re aware of how summoning works, right?”

“Get to the point,” said Nagatobimaru.

“Have you ever really thought about how amazing what we do is? I mean, think about it. Here’s a demon on another plane of existence. Sort of a sub-dimension, if you will.”

“I’m getting impatient!”

“I have to explain the background or you’ll just have to hear it all later.”

“Let him tell the story,” cautioned Lucian.

“Very well. But speak quickly, boy.”

“Where was I? Right, there’s a demon, right? Just sitting there minding his own business and *wham* he gets turned into energy, teleported across thousands of kilometers, crosses a dimensional barrier, and turns

back into matter again when he reaches here. I mean, an ESPer, if they practice about a million years, can cross dimensions with teleportation once in a dozen tries. But a fourteen year old can summon up a servant of Hell with a couple of days worth of training. I mean it's the same for you." He looked at Osman.

"Broadly speaking, yes," he replied.

"Then even more amazingly we can turn them into energy again, Fuse them with our own souls, and get the benefit of their powers and strengths. So your duplicate posed a question- what would happen if two demons of the same type were summoned to the exact same spot at exactly the same time?"

"A very messy explosion, and a pissed off demon lord," said Nagatobimaru.

"Not necessarily," said the other. "You saw the creature we created back there. Yes, we don't have the exact details worked out, but if you combine the energies of the demons before they become solid again, while employing the techniques of fusing with a demon yourself, well, you saw! We were close- it would have changed the way summoning is done forever. And we pioneered the technique. Our names would have gone down in history!"

"But instead I got a visit from an angry demon lord demanding to know what's being done to his subjects. You know what kind of position that puts me in?"

"Like I said, we thought it was fine," said the first one.

"So, what?" asked Nagatobimaru. "You were trying to create a single demon with the capabilities of two?"

"Yes!" said the second. "You see the possibilities now? If the technique could be perfected, and then extended?" He seemed quite animated now. "Imagine a raiju with the speed of a dozen! The energy and skill! And if killed they just go back to being separate entities again. There's no down side, and everything to gain!"

"A fascinating theory," admitted Lucian, "but one that should have stayed a theory. I want all your notes on the subject, and I'm going to have an ESPer wipe your memories pertaining to all of this."

They began to protest.

I wonder, if I do something sinful, and someone erases my memory of the event, am I still carrying that sin? If I was being judged I could rightly claim no memory of the event, and what just being would condemn a person for an act he had no recollection of? After all, he would then not be given the choice to repent his actions, and like Osman said, the Heavens are big on choice.

“What about their punishment?” asked Nagatobimaru, perhaps not thinking along the exact same lines as myself, but close enough.

“You can’t punish us for an act we won’t remember doing!” protested the first.

“Not to worry, we’ll leave enough of your memory to know you were doing something illegal out at the cave tonight, but not exactly what.”

“I demand justice for those subjects of mine these two killed! They should be given to me!”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees.

“If they had been in your domain, perhaps you would have a case,” said Lucian carefully. “But they were caught here on the island, and so the island’s laws are what we will use.”

“A slap on the wrist!” muttered Nagatobimaru.

“What if it wasn’t?” I asked.

Every eye turned to me.

“You have a suggestion, Dean?” asked Lucian.

“I’ve read about talismans that can suppress a person’s power totally. Just in passing, don’t worry, I don’t know any formulas for such a thing!” I hastily added, seeing Lucian’s eyes narrow. “Couldn’t something like that be adapted to make sure they can never summon a rajiu again? And I know there are talismans to make powers easier, I made one for my spirit projection. I don’t see why it couldn’t be reversed, so it’s harder for them to summon. Don’t make it impossible, but make sure that it’s hard enough that they really have to weigh the consequences of their actions to even begin.”

Lucian looked thoughtful. “We could just take the ritual from their minds.”

“But they could just relearn it, in that case. Right?”

“I suppose. Is what Dean suggests acceptable to you, lord Nagatobimaru?”

“Letting my kin have them for sport would be acceptable, but I suppose I must recognize your law. Plus I am a bit outnumbered if I wanted to press the issue.” He glanced around the room, filled with teachers and the rest of the Helping People Club, all very powerful in our own right.

“Excellent! In that case I’ll consider the matter-”

“I have one other condition,” he interrupted.

“Yes?”

“There’s still the issue of who was impersonating me.”

“I’m not sure I can help you there,” he said honestly. “A being like yourself no doubt has made your share of enemies.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“True. But there’s one who has both the means and the power to impersonate me.”

“As long as they aren’t in the human world, I couldn’t care less. What’s the condition?”

He pointed at us. “I want the Helping People Club to come back with me and mount an assault on the place I think the culprit is hiding. I’ll consider the danger that poses to them as payment for the lives that were stolen from me.”

“Out of the question! This is a purely internal demon matter. You have forces at your command, use them!”

“But as much as it galls me to say this, I need them!” he protested. “Do you know how difficult it was to get here? Sure, I can step over myself, but it’s a long way from where I live. I got teleported here but only they can get me back.”

“That sounds like a personal problem. What’s the rush, anyway?”

“I want to catch them unawares. He must have a spy or something in my ranks to make sure two of my followers disappear on schedule. They did tonight so we’re covered. If we don’t do this before the next scheduled time he’ll know I’m on to him, and reinforce his guard.”

“I don’t know, I could ask for volunteers from the staff, I guess. These kids have already been to the demon world much more than I would normally allow anyway.”

“Excellent, they’ll know what we’re dealing with then.”

Lucian tried another tack. “They’re just kids, wouldn’t more experienced fighters be preferable?”

He looked at Lucian for a moment, possibly trying to figure out of he was serious. “Have you felt their spiritual energy?”

“Just because they’re energetic doesn’t mean they’re great fighters.”

He barked a laugh. “No, but being a spirit energist, a true martial artist, a shaman, a demon artist and whatever the heck it is Dean is does. Plus, your teachers aren’t what I would consider at the top of their game. I mean look at Katsunori here- he’s ancient now! What good is he going to do me?”

“Want to go a few rounds and find out?” Katsunori asked, gripping his spear.

“Maybe another time. What, don’t you trust your own schooling? I mean you are pumping out demon killers here, isn’t that right?”

“We’re not ‘pumping out’ anything. Yes, we make it clear that keeping demons in their own plane is what’s best-”

“Bull. You make them wear military uniforms, just look at them!”

All the teachers were now looking at us. True, the teachers also wore the same uniform, but many of them had embellishments or additions not exactly ‘strac.’

“You sequester them here on this little island paradise of yours and train them for four years on how to be demon killers. If you really wanted just normal kids who happened to use powers you would situate the school where more people were.”

“That’s a security risk,” explained Lucian.

“But one you could deal with. No, you get them used to using their powers all the time, and when it’s time to integrate back into a powerless society, they find they can’t. They’re too used to using their powers and can’t stop, despite the security risk. So they have no choice but to work for your Foundation and hound us.”

“So we should just allow demons to run around free on Earth? Out of the question.”

“I agree, not all of them would be able to handle it here, their natures would get the better of them. But those that could master their impulses, maybe even pass for human...” He trailed off.

“It’s an argument I had with him many times, growing up,” Katsunori said sadly. “He came to respect me as a fighter, and though he would never admit it, somewhat of a friend. I like to think I changed his mind about a few things, but maybe that’s just my arrogance talking.”

Now everyone was looking at Nagatobimaru. He looked down. “I did- somewhat, you understand- enjoy our time together.”

“Wow. How long did it take you to admit that to yourself?”

“Maybe... just now. Look, I know what humans can do. I know what Achintya can do, he’s pulled power from me often enough that I know he gets in his share of scraps. With the variety of powers they have and the forces I can summon myself, I think we can take who I’m thinking of pretty easily.”

Lucian seemed thoughtful. “It seems you have some previous connection to Nagatobimaru?” he asked Katsunori.

He nodded. “We traveled together for some time after I took up the spear.”

“You trust what he’s saying?”

“He’s overconfident to a fault. And I haven’t seen these kids fight, but I’ve heard things about this club of theirs. I mean, that’s new, but they’ve been together for years now. And you’re complaining about him all the time, so there must be something there.”

Lucian scowled.

“There’s another thing,” put in Nagatobimaru. “I wasn’t sure if I should mention it. I’m not very political, I don’t have the patience for it. But forces are moving in the Demon World, towards what end I don’t know. I didn’t care, at the time. But my subordinates sometimes overhear things and report them to me. They’ve heard whispers of some names that demon kind is watching or will watch in the future. The name ‘Dean’ was among them. I’m sure now, given the company he keeps and the weird, shifting power I feel in his soul, he’s the one they mean.”

“Great, I have both angels *and* demons focused on me,” I said sarcastically.

“You’ve made a name for yourself,” admitted Lucian. “Something our seers didn’t anticipate, given your... unique nature. Otherwise I might have tried to rein you in a bit more, earlier on. And it was implied by that dream creature you met that you were uniquely selected to combat some force in the future.”

“True. Why do you think I work so hard?”

“You worked hard long before that. You have a driving need to explore, understand, create. Your parents are proud of you, you know.”

That had come out of nowhere. “Uh, okay? I guess you’ve been talking with them?”

“You think I don’t tell them what you’re up to? What kind of principal do you take me for?”

“So can I take them or not?” asked Nagatobimaru, getting impatient again.

“I don’t know...”

“Do we get a say in this?” asked Yasui, raising a hand.

“Are you eighteen?”

Yasui looked daggers at him. “You seriously believe, after all we’ve been through, that I’m not emotionally mature enough to make decisions for myself?”

“We few with powers do seem to grow up fast,” remarked Katsunori.

“They have to,” Mr Deigato, the demon artist teacher, added fiercely. “We have only four years to get them ready, after all.”

“This is meaningless if they don’t want to actually go off on this fool quest. What is your intention, Miss Yamashita?”

“We’re going. Do you remember Carlita? I do. Albert talked about her all the time. Even showed us a few of her battles with the Time Frame. I want to be that good. I mean she’s a spirit hunter and so probably out of my league, but without real fights against demons actually trying to harm me I’ll never improve. Much less attain half her fighting prowess. There

was a time I thought my powers pointless, even stupid. But I'm committed now. *I'll* protect Dean." She glared at Elizabeth as she said that last bit.

"Ugh, you would bring her up," said Lucian, making a face. "But I get the gist. The rest of you are willing to follow Dean, should he decide to go on this fool attack?"

"I'd follow Dean anywhere," said Elizabeth, stepping up immediately. "And it'll be *me* protecting him."

"I'm certainly not allowing a first year... wait, I recognize you now. Too many new faces, what with the time displaced students a few years ago and then half a junior high class this year. Yes, I thought your little group had grown by one. I think I understand why. Well, with all that protection you'll be safe no matter what you do."

He had said that sarcastically but Professor Heffernam, a cambion with nine fox tails, snorted.

Probably thinking of something dirty.

"You'll accept responsibility for them?" Lucian asked Nagatobimaru.

"My demons will go in first," he agreed. "They'll just be there as backup. It'll be easy, don't worry."

"I've heard that before," he grumbled. "Very well, but I want them all back in one-"

"Great," said Nagatobimaru, striding over and grabbing us all up in his massive arms. "We're leaving!"

"Wait!" shouted Lucian, but it was too late.

Attack on Tengu Palace

We attack at noon, charging across the minefield. It's the last thing they'll be expecting!

We found ourselves dangling in mid-air, high above the demon gate below.

“Finally got out of there,” said the now much more dangerous looking demon lord. He looked the same, of course, we just didn’t have any backup and gravity worked just fine here if he wanted to drop us.

“Right,” he said, looking at Achintya. “We’re headed for the temple of the tengu, you ever seen it?”

“I can’t say I have,” he answered.

“That’s fine. You can pull the image from my mind with that disgusting power of yours, right? Some demon you’re linked to?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yes, it’ll just take a second.”

“Wait,” cried Osman. “Your brain will fry if you go into his mind. He thinks in demon tongue.”

Achintya winked. “Don’t worry, I speak demon tongue.” He closed his eyes and shouted “Pragmatic art of the simurgh: mind to mind.”

As he was already touching Nagatobimaru he didn’t have to move, and both were motionless a few seconds. “Got it,” said Achintya. “This guy is living it up.”

“Well, he is a demon lord,” he remarked.

“What?” we all asked.

“You didn’t say anything about crashing down the house of an actual demon lord!” protested Yasui.

“Don’t worry,” placated Nagatobimaru. “Like I said, you’re just getting me there and backing up my forces. I’ll take care of Sojobo.”

“Still, won’t he have, like, tons of guards? Especially if he’s gearing up for something big,” put in Christina.

“You guys aren’t chickening out, are you?”

“Usually we come up with a plan for this sort of thing,” I said.

“The plan is, swoop down, take them by surprise, kill as many as we can outside, get in, track down Sojobo and get some answers. There, satisfied? Make with the teleport.”

Achintya looked Nagatobimaru up and down. “You do know how much you weigh, right?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

He shook his head. “You have no idea how teleportation actually works, do you? Even taking all the strength from the strongest demon I know, that isn’t you because I don’t want to be dropped from this height, I doubt I could lift you, let alone you *and everyone else*.”

“Oh. Guess I should have asked before just getting us here. Heh. Oh well. Figure something out, there must be some way to do it.”

“I hate to go down there,” I said looking down at the assembled demons clustered around the gate. “But if Achintya here can give me the image, I could use a teleport ward.”

“I could make you stronger,” said Christina. “I’ve never put much effort into learning the spirit boost skill but I do know it. That and my mastery of spirit energy can pump you up a little.”

“And I can emulate it!” said Elizabeth happily. “So you’ll get twice the boost!”

“See, all taken care of,” said Nagatobimaru. “Get cracking.”

“And we could do the whole splitting thing,” I said. “You could take some of us, and Elizabeth could take the rest.”

“Oh. I guess that’s doable then. I’ll give it a shot. Sorry Mr Simurgh, this’ll be twice in as many minutes. Augmenting art, strength of the simurgh!”

“Do you have to call them out like that?” asked Osman.

“Actually, yes,” he answered. “Wow, that’s a rush. Okay, lay it on me, ladies.”

They both concentrated, touching Achintya, and he started to glow a little bit as the energy entered him.

“Okay, I’m taking Nagatobimaru and Osman,” he said. “Elizabeth, I hope you can get the rest. Ready?”

She nodded.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Pragmatic art of the imp, teleportation!”

They disappeared, and the rest of us started to fall. Elizabeth grabbed us up. “Pragmatic art of the imp, teleportation!”

We disappeared as well.

We found ourselves some ways away from what looked like a Japanese temple, complete with rock gardens, weird plant life, and a whole lot of tengu wandering around. Tengu were humanoid, with large noses and black wings, and most wore a sort of mockery of a Japanese priest’s robes. They carried short swords, and as I looked, several were in the air, probably scouting for anyone approaching in the distance. The ones nearest to us on the ground pulled their swords when they saw us.

“Now for the fun part,” said Nagatobimaru, as five raiju appeared before him.

“Great lord, command us!” they said in unison, going down on one knee.

“We attack the temple at once! Don’t harm these humans and keep them out of trouble if you can. Leave Sojobo for me.”

“Yes, my lord!” said the five. “Attack!!”

They took to the air, bolts of lightning preceding them.

“Have fun you guys,” Nagatobimaru chuckled, and took off after them.

Elizabeth, by this time, had gotten Anthy out, and was looking pleadingly at Christina.

“Are you gonna do it?” she asked excitedly. “Come on, they know we’re here!”

She sighed. “I guess you don’t have to hold back around here. Fine, we’ll do it.”

Elizabeth clapped her hands together and started bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Yes!”

“You guys better get back, you know how this works.”

“Come on, Osman,” I said, grabbing some acceleration wards and sticking them on the girls, Anthy included. “Let’s give these girls some space.”

“What about me?” asked Yasui.

“Go do what you do best, I guess?” I hedged, pointing vaguely in the direction of the chaos already brewing as lightning and fire attacks filled the air. I got out an acceleration ward and slapped it on her back as well.

“Suits me. Spirit clone!” Two clones appeared and she yelled “attack!” herself, all three of herself leaping into the action.

Wow, she's pretty fast when she needs to be.

"I'm not sure about this," said Osman. "Just because they're demons, doesn't mean just slaughtering them isn't sinful. They're ending the existence of a soul before it has a chance to fully repent."

"Do you see a lot of repenting going on here?" I asked.

Suddenly I was pushed forward, as waves of energy erupted from the girls behind us.

"Oh yeah!" Elizabeth shouted, clearly enjoying the sensation again.

"Is it just me, or does she like that technique a little too much?" Osman asked.

I looked overhead as Anthy, twice as big as usual, went overhead with Elizabeth on her back. They both started firing energy bolts into the fray.

"Going to have you make me a talisman when we get back!" shouted Christina, running past me and firing arrows of her own.

"Hey, this day is looking up!" I remarked. "Come on Osman, are we letting the girls get all the glory today?"

"I just feel like killing them is wrong!"

"So don't. We can be the distraction team."

"Huh?"

"Observe." I raised a hand and targeted a blast inside a pagoda looking structure probably 60 meters away. It blasted apart.

"Oh!"

Osman and I moved forward, taking apart buildings, statues, larger rocks, even putting a burst of wind energy at the bottom of a pool, causing a watery explosion that knocked any tengu near it off their feet. I could feel Osman was drawing energy from the talisman I had given him, but he was still running out of energy fast. Of course, that may have just been my perception, given Elizabeth and Christina were again warping any energy lines in the area with their now massive spirit energies.

Naturally the ground was shaking again.

I wondered if Osman would accept some sort of weapon if I made him one. I hated to see him in a protracted battle, with no energy and no means to defend himself. Sort of a last ditch sort of thing. I would have to think about it.

The sixteen of us (I wasn't counting Kat as she was letting my talisman do the work for the moment, as Osman needed some energy to activate it) made a straight line towards the larger building in the center. I noticed

Achintya sticking close to Christina, and when two tengu rushed her he somehow turned their fire off. Energy seemed to stream from them into him, leaving them looking confused long enough for her to put an arrow through their heads.

Didn't he say something about shutting down some major demon lord? I guess that's a handy technique to have. Wonder if I could pick it up?

As Nagatobimaru had predicted, the number of actual guards here seemed light, and with the speed and ferocity of the five raiju that had been summoned they didn't put up much of a fight. Our team cleaned up what was left, with Yasui and her two clones engaging several tengu at close range. With my acceleration ward on them they weren't much more than a blur, her kicks and punches doing a lot of damage to their unarmored bodies. As soon as one was disabled she moved on to another, dodging and striking out with equal ease.

The raiju and Nagatobimaru went inside, and we followed. Elizabeth landed, and Christina ran up behind us.

"We'll guard the door, get in there," said Elizabeth. Her hair was blown all over the place, and she looked like she was having the time of her life.

"Having fun?" remarked Osman.

"It's not too bad," said Christina with a smile.

"Oh yeah," shouted Elizabeth. "You have no idea how great it is not to be afraid of my power anymore." Anthy blasted another column of energy into three tengu that were running up, and they disintegrated. "Plus having all this energy means I don't have to hold back!"

"Stay safe, you two."

Inside, we followed the trail of busted walls and scorched floor to the main chamber, where the raiju were covering what must be the demon lord of tengu, Sojobo. He was twice as tall as his followers, and was looking calmly down at the scene from a chair set on a dais against the wall. Several ash piles, what was left of his final guards, littered the chamber. At each corner of the room there was a funny looking statue, and Japanese banners hung at regular intervals.

"Ah, you're here," said Nagatobimaru. "I waited for you, isn't that nice of me?"

"Thanks," I said, meaning it. I needed the information this demon had just as much as he did.

"Waiting on a human?" sneered Sojobo. "You really have taken a liking to these pathetic worms, haven't you?"

Nagatobimaru laughed. “What, are your senses as dull as your brains? Feel that energy out there that’s tearing up any remaining tengu that try to get near this place? You call that pathetic? They took out more than my forces did!”

“I admit, your attacking with humans did surprise me. You must have noticed most of my men were immune to your lighting blasts.”

“Yeah, but not to my fire. Poor planing on your part, I’d say. And the claws of my followers seemed to work just as well.”

“Still, we could have beaten you without their interference.”

“So who’s the more stupid? The guy who didn’t come up with any contingency plans in case I showed up with non raiju, or me, who used what resources I needed to in order to take you down?”

“Still, humans? That’s why you’re not part of the great initiative. Wype decided your simpering over humans would bring us down. I mean, that one’s a petitioner for goodness sake.” He pointed to Osman. “What did you bring him for? He’s useless here!”

In answer, Osman snapped his fingers and one of the columns holding the place up exploded, sending chunks of stone flying everywhere. The ceiling sagged a little bit.

Sojobo stared back and forth at the now missing column and Osman. “You aren’t supposed to be able to do that,” he finally said.

Osman pulled off his sunglasses, allowing us to see his odd looking eyes. I was not used to seeing him with them off, and wondered what he was doing. He put them back on with a flourish. “Deal with it.”

I think he’s been hanging around me too long.

Sojobo shook his head as if to clear it. Finally throwing up his hands in disgust. “What do you want, anyway? Tearing my home to pieces like this, you better be ready for the consequences.”

“I want to know why you appeared to two humans and told them my followers volunteered for some sick experiment!”

“Wait, I did that?” Sojobo asked innocently. “Are you sure?”

“Uh, yes. We have proof!”

“No you don’t, stop lying.”

“You can’t prove I’m lying.”

“I don’t have to!”

“Anyway, why would you go to the trouble of making your followers immune to lighting attacks if you weren’t expecting trouble in the form of raiju throwing lighting attacks at you?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I... that is-”

“He’s got you there,” I said.

“This doesn’t concern you, human. Stay out of it.”

I glared at him, about to tell him that yes, it did, but Nagatobimaru bellowed for Achintya to get in here.

He walked in with Yasui and Elizabeth. “I doubt there’s a tengu for a mile around this place,” he remarked. “And I thought those spirit hunters I met recently were dangerous. Sheesh! You bellowed, boss?”

“Read this guy’s mind and figure out what his plans were.”

“Uh, shouldn’t you, like, secure him first or something? At least take his sword away.”

“He’s not going to do anything, are you, Sojobo?”

“Actually, I am.” he said slowly, “remember that part about me not having contingency plans? That wasn’t entirely accurate. Attack!”

The four statues at the corner of the rooms burst apart and four blood red mechanical horrors burst out.

“Crap!” I shouted. “I’ll deal with them, don’t destroy them or they explode! Elizabeth, do what I do! Acceleration.”

I ran towards the nearest one, catching a glimpse of Sojobo looking quite puzzled. Elizabeth summoned Anthy, who came tearing into the place, wings buzzing, and she jumped on her back and headed to the one in the other corner.

The Vessel took a swing at me, but I easily dodged it with my speed and reached a hand to touch the jagged body of the thing. I waited what seemed like seconds to me for Elizabeth to hover over the other one and touch the head.

I applied power to my will and gave a tug on the soul I felt writhing inside, and it came out with a satisfying ease. The vessel clattered to the floor, along with the second one a scant second later. I released the soul and it floated there, and Elizabeth did the same.

“That was neat!” she said.

“Kill them both! Don’t let them touch you!” shouted Sojobo, leaping up out of his chair. I saw both on the far side of the room get out their chest canons.

Crap, can I dodge that blast?

But suddenly Yasui was in the way.

“I’ll protect you, always,” she said, and spun around.

The one aiming for me fired.

The instant the beam was about to hit her, and it was almost too fast for even me to dodge but I think I could have managed it, she was gone. In her place was the other vessel, which was firing at Anthy. Thus, both beams struck the opposite vessel, obviously confusing them both. I didn't know what was going on, but I wasn't going to waste the opportunity. I touched it from behind.

"In position!" I shouted to Elizabeth, who zipped over to the other one and touched it as well.

I again put energy into my will and *pulled*, yanking the soul out. Elizabeth did the same, and again both fell to the ground.

Nagatobimaru hadn't moved, and glanced around, making sure there were no more threats.

"As I was saying," he said, taking a step towards Sojobo. "Are we going to do this the easy way, or the hard way? Unless you have some other laughable contingency plan?"

"I do, actually," he said sadly, pulling a rough sphere from beneath his robes. It seemed to be made of bloodiron as well. "I adapted this from them. Deathburst."

It started to flash.

"Explosive!" I shouted. "Protect yourselves! Phase!"

I phased and shut my eyes, but felt Elizabeth put up a barrier and Yasui's energy vanished completely from the room.

Crap, Osman! I thought. Does Kat know how to do barriers? Then a second later I realized of course she did, cohesion was basically a tiny barrier accelerated with TK and slammed into something. *What did I have to worry about?*

What I had never really picked up on was the fact that being phased was silent. After all, sound was just pressure waves being carried by the air, and currently everything passed through me as though I was a ghost. *How can I still breathe?* When I finally risked opening my eyes, I saw what was left of the throne room. Looking around nervously I breathed a sigh of relief when all my friends seemed to be fine. Nagatobimaru, however, was in bad shape.

I ended the phase and ran over to him. "Do you need healing?"

He waved me off. "I'll be fine in a minute. You humans okay?"

We all answered that we were, and I looked around to see if Sojobo had survived.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“He didn’t,” growled Nagatobimaru. “I only did because I flew backwards out of the way. What was that, anyway?”

“He said he adapted it from the vessels. My guess is a vessel that was just a lump of metal that he could command to use the deathburst ability in case of trouble.”

“Pity,” said Osman. “Still, he is to be somewhat admired. He must really be dedicated to have destroyed himself rather than give up whatever he’s been planning.”

Nagatobimaru managed a weak laugh and pushed himself to his knees. “He’s not gone, so don’t feel too bad.”

“He was summoned?”

“What? No. Oh, you probably don’t know this, not many do. But I’ll tell you as long as you don’t spread it around. Demon lords can only truly be killed by one of their own, who then becomes the next lord. He’ll reform in purgatory. Not a pleasant experience, but he’ll be back all right. And he won’t be so easy, next time.”

“Everything all right in here?” I heard Christina yell from the door. I saw she had an arrow out and was peering around.

“All clear,” I said. “If you want to start going through the rooms, see if there are any stragglers or documents lying around, that would be great.”

“I’ll see what I can find.” She went back into the hallway and out of sight.

“What exactly was I doing to those... things?” asked Elizabeth.

“Ah, did the Bloodiron survive?” I asked eagerly. Looking around I saw lumps of it scattered about. “Excellent, the alchemy department is going to owe me again!” I started getting out some contain wards. “To answer your question, you were pulling the souls out of the things with a soul wielder technique. Hey, are they still floating around in here?”

It was true, four multi-colored balls of shimmery light were gently floating about the room.

“What do we do with them?” asked Osman. “We can’t just leave them floating here.”

“I can’t exactly stick a contain ward on them, either,” I complained. “I could... wait a second, is there anything on this spot in the real world?” I asked Nagatobimaru.

“Nothing much of interest. Why? It’s probably nighttime in Japan anyway.”

“Perfect. I’ll just open a portal to the real world and shove them through.”

“Pity to throw money away.” The demon lord was back on his feet.

“But I suppose without containers they will either turn into something weird or just fade away. Oh crap, I just remembered!”

“What?”

But he wasn't listening, and suddenly five raiju, screaming in agony, appeared before him. They took a moment to get on their feet again.

“Next time, dodge out of the way!” he growled. “It's a good thing you were summoned, too. I've lost enough subjects to this guy.”

“But my lord, we were shielding you with our bodies, that you might live,” ventured the badger looking one.

“I don't- thank you,” he said gruffly. They looked in awe and bowed low.

“It is an honor to serve you directly.”

“I'll be heading back soon, we're having a party tonight. Invite all the succubus you can find!”

They gave a great cheer, but one put his hand up as Nagatobimaru was about to dismiss them.

“Humans,” he said to us. “Thank you for fighting alongside us. They were mostly immune to our lighting, so it was a great help to have you along.”

We looked at each other.

“That's quite all right,” I said hesitantly. “I didn't actually expect gratitude from you, to be perfectly honest. Your reputation-”

He waved that away. “We have to give summoners a hard time, it's in the rules somewhere. You guys came here, and we saw what you all did. We were impressed, and that isn't easy.” The others nodded. “We respect fighters, even the holy one over there. We don't like the side he fights for, but he helped us, so thanks is the least we can do.”

“In that case we were glad to help.”

And they vanished.

“So, back to the souls thing,” I said, looking at the floating energy.

“If you want, I'll give you most of their worth in gold, if you can put them in something. You pulled them out, after all, so they're yours, technically.”

“How much gold?” I inquired.

“Dean!” said Osman. “They have to go back!”

“Do they?” I asked. “Think about it, these are the souls of people who pledged themselves to demons in life. For power. They aren't the good guys. And chances are they'll just come right back here and start their torture. Which would you rather have? Oblivion until doomsday or torture, being turned into a demon, and then living here a few thousand years? To ultimately be killed following some stupid demon lord like Sojobo there.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I guess oblivion,” he said at last.

“There you are. There should be a vault or something around here. I doubt he has his total stash here in the building, but he’s got to have some currency around. Look for a big, locked door or a room with spheres in it. If there’s some empty ones we can stick them in there.”

We spread out over the compound and we did find a vault room, which I phased through and unlocked from the other side. There was some gold and souls inside, which Nagatobimaru claimed, but I went back out with four empty spheres of what looked like some kind of crystal. I did an analysis of it, which took me about eight minutes, but everyone was too busy looking through the wreckage of the place to care.

I then had to figure out how to pluck the souls from the air. In the end I just reached for them and visualized extracting them from the air, which while not a solid, was still matter. It worked, which left me holding the sphere in one hand and the soul in the other. It was then I realized that the skill of pulling the soul from something and putting one into something were totally different. And I didn’t know that skill, it required mastering extracting at the very least.

“Well, crap.”

I stood there, wondering what to do next, when Nagatobimaru came back in.

“Ready to go? Wait, you haven’t done anything!”

“Sorry,” I said. “I neglected to realize I don’t actually know how to put them into containers. Just take them out.”

“Of all the- fine. Ugh, which is the least likely to cause problems? You have any beans?”

“Beans?”

“Yeah. Beans. Beans, you know? I’ll go look in the kitchen, I think I passed it.”

He left again, grumbling to himself. A moment later he was back, carrying a huge sack of beans.

“Found some,” he said, setting the sack down. “Now, how did that go?”

He concentrated and suddenly an oni showed up out of nowhere.

“What the?” said the oni. “Wait, I didn’t leave home. What’s going-” He looked around and saw Nagatobimaru. “Uh. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Beans,” said Nagatobimaru.

The oni licked his lips. “What, you want this human bludgeoned to death?” He hefted the club. “You didn’t need that many beans just for that.”

“No, I want you to put these souls that are floating around in their rightful containers!”

“Oh. No bashing the human?”

“Off limits.”

He sighed. “Fine, give it here.” He grabbed the soul and the chunk of clear rock and shoved them together.

“Three more,” I said, pointing.

“Very well.” He did all three, grabbed the bag and hefted it. “That all then?”

“Yeah, you can go.”

He disappeared.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sorry about that.”

“Eh, whatever. Come on, we’re out of here.” I grabbed the four soul currency gems. “Oh right, your money.” He counted out some gold coins and handed them to me.

“I do have the soul appraising skill, you know.” I was bluffing, of course. Oh, I had the skill, but I hadn’t used it. And even if I had, I didn’t know the current exchange rate for soul power to gold coin.

“Oh, very well.” He counted out some more, which I took, then grabbed the spheres and shoved them in the sack with the others.

“Thank you,” I said, putting the coins in my own pouch.

“Now can we leave?”

“With pleasure.”

We met up in the destroyed courtyard with everyone else.

“You kids need my help to get home?” asked Nagatobimaru.

“You said it’s Japan on the other side?” asked Yasui.

“That’s right.”

“If you open that portal, Dean, I can probably take us to where the local circle is for getting back to the school.”

“If you’ve seen it you could use the teleport ward and just get us there instantly.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Looks like we’re okay,” I said to Nagatobimaru.

“I’ll step you across, no need to trouble yourselves,” he said, grabbing us up again. Suddenly we were in Japan, and he was jumping out of the way of a car.

“Yeah, the reason for the portal was to see if it was safe to go through,” I mentioned.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I see where that could be an issue,” he said, looking around. “The place has changed since I hung out here. Anyway, thanks a lot for your help. I’ll check up on old beak nose when he gets back, let you know if I can squeeze anything about his plans out. Look me up if you’re ever in the demon world and in a jam.”

He vanished again.

“Let’s get home,” said Osman. “Before the Foundation moves in force to try and rescue us from a place we aren’t anymore.”

I agreed, and handed Yasui a ward after making sure we weren’t being observed.

It wasn’t a total loss, I thought to myself. We got some money, and we got a name. The ‘Great Initiative.’ That’s more than we had before, and every little bit helps.

We vanished, and the ward burned up, leaving no trace of our very short visit to Japan.

Christmas Dates

*"I got my pocket picked, by old Saint Nick-
but I'm feeling fine." --Christmastime In Tinseltown*

We made it back to the school without incident, teleporting in and surprising the girl on duty with our sudden appearance. She called the principal as we didn't have a pass, and he came immediately.

"Thank the Heavenly powers you're all right," he said, rushing as fast as his bad leg would carry him.

Uh, no, thank overwhelming forces, the element of surprise, and our own dedication to our individual craft. We were in the Demon World, Heaven had nothing to do with it.

"You are all okay, right?" He looked us over.

"Never better," we assured him. "Nagatobimaru was right, the demon lord of the tengu was involved somehow in this. However, he blew himself up rather than allow his mind to be probed."

"Unfortunate. Still, you're back, and that's the important thing."

"He does seem to act impulsively," said Osman, "but he did his best to safeguard us."

I held up a bunch of contain wards. "I got more bloodiron for the school. Let me know where you want it!"

"Lumps or working models?"

"Lumps. The four of them got pretty messed up in the explosion."

"I'll take them. Thanks." I handed them over. "I'm sure you're hungry and tired, you can fill me in on exactly what happened later."

"Thanks," said Osman gratefully.

"See you all tomorrow!"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

We headed back to the dorms, but before we went inside I dragged everyone to the back.

“Here,” I said, drawing out the gold coins, “I’ll split these with everyone. May as well get some reward out of all this hard work we’re putting in.”

Split so many ways it was a depressingly small number, but given that we could probably scrap each coin for thousands of dollars, not many were needed. The girls said goodnight, but I asked Yasui and Christina to stay a moment.

“Thanks for everything, I didn’t think it would get that crazy,” said Achintya, flipping a coin in the air.

“Not a problem,” I answered. “I’d love to hear about your adventures sometime. Maybe we can have lunch together soon?”

“Sure, the weekend if we don’t have the same lunch period. I’ll see you around!”

With him and Osman gone, I turned to Yasui.

“You know what I’m about to ask,” I said to her with a smile.

“It’s called instant substitution. I’ve been working on it, but the situations it’s useful in probably won’t come up enough to make it worth it. That time, of course, was perfect. I hoped I could switch places with people, make them hit each other, but it only works on non-living stuff.”

“Ah, which those things qualify as.”

“Exactly. Plus you have to have something roughly human sized to switch with, and quite frankly I’d rather just smash through something than try to get fancy like that. These special techniques I can learn just seem too specific and limited to be of much use.”

“Yeah, I could make you a talisman tattoo of teleportation that wouldn’t have that restriction.”

“I could just use spirit step and not have that restriction. Anyway, I’m going up. I’ll see you later!”

“And as for you,” I said to Christina, “what sort of talisman would you like, so I can start looking into it.”

“I’m not sure,” she replied. “I was thinking maybe flight? I mean Yasui has her boots which make her super fast, and let her jump really far. Elizabeth has Anthy she can ride and fly around on. Osman rides around on that big dog thing when he needs to go somewhere. We’re always stuck walking! Of course that air blast thing you do seems to have a tremendous range.”

“It does! Now flying should be easy enough. Can’t you use air step though?”

“That technique is really just for standing around, not for going anywhere. Besides, it doesn’t let me jump any higher.” She jumped to demonstrate. “See? What good is that going to do me? I’m not really sure what good that technique is, apart from slowing me down if I fell off of something.”

“I do see what you mean. Let me think about it. You don’t have to go anywhere, per say, you just want to be able to attack without getting left behind, right?”

“I guess.”

“Okay. I think I can come up with something cool. Or a few things, and you can take your pick.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing! See you later!”

“Bye.”

And so I researched a few things, and a few days before Christmas break started, Osman and I presented our ideas to Christina. Yasui had put “The Case of the Botched Fuuuuuusion!” up on the board under solved, which I had to wonder was strictly true.

“So here’s what we’ve got,” I told her. “I can make you a duplicate of the acceleration talisman I have, which would make you way faster. Not as fast as flying, but faster. Then there’s what you suggested, flying. Easy to accomplish, but rather mundane, don’t you think? I haven’t really stretched myself with talisman making yet this year! Imagine, my limitless potential just going to waste.”

“Get on with it.”

“Sorry my flare for the dramatic upsets you. Anyway, my friend Osman here, have you two met?” I threw an arm over his shoulders, “Osman here and I have worked out a little something better.”

“Almost heirloom quality, if you want to be technical about it,” Osman said.

“Indeed. This is an item that, two generations from now will be passed down as an inherited item. Much like the boots on my friend Yasui. Have you two met?”

Yasui put on a big grin and held out her hand for Christina to shake. Christina crossed her arms over her chest. Yasui made a clicking noise with her tongue and retracted her hand.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“So what is this wonder item you two are proposing?”

“It comes in two parts. First, may I see that cross you use?”

“I guess.” She unhooked her spirit focus from her wrist and handed it to me. I looked it over.

“Now this isn’t a talisman by itself, right?” I asked. “It just allows you to manifest the bow?”

“That’s right. Though technically I’m powerless without it, the power I use most is the bow.”

“Oh, I see. I ask because these things are totally simple to make. If you wanted something else instead of the cross, I could do that for you.”

“I’m happy with the cross.”

“Very well.” I handed it back. “Plus I don’t have to worry about overlapping powers trying to add my functions to it. So here’s the deal- Osman has agreed to contribute his energy and help place his supernatural vision into the object. You would just will your sight to expand and it would be like you had moved, even though you hadn’t. Osman said it took a while to get used to, but it’s not too hard.”

“And as a bonus you’ll get to see energy in the way I do!” he added. “This is what I meant about heirloom quality, only my family seems to possess this eye power.”

“Okay, but how does that help? When you guys were inside, I still would have had to run inside to do anything.”

“Oh, but I’m not done. I said this was *inheritor item quality* and I meant it. Just for you, as a special, ‘friends with benefits’ (the benefit being friends with the greatest talisman maker yadda yadda) I am prepared to make you a unique offer. Two functions for the price of one. Yes, though it will be difficult, I think I can rig you up a tiny portal that you can shoot arrows through. Hooked up to the eye thing-”

“Eye thing?” complained Osman.

“Ahem. Hooked up to the contributed supernatural vision talisman component-”

“Thank you.”

“It will open a portal in front of you large enough and short lived enough for an arrow to pass through. You’ll probably have to relearn archery or at least compensate for the effect, but imagine standing safely outside a castle wall and firing on the inside.”

Yasui gave a low whistle. “That does sound amazing.”

“And you can pull this off?”

“Sure thing, probably. I’ll want to be very sure of my spiral, of course. We don’t want a repeat of the Lusty Ring case, now do we?” Everyone shook their heads. “But we have a unique opportunity. Christmas vacation is coming up, and we get two weeks off. By my calculations,” I pulled out a piece of paper, printed from the Demongate High website talisman app. “It shouldn’t take me more than a week of solid work, eight hours a day.”

“I don’t want you to give up your Christmas vacation!”

“Well, I don’t want to work on it piecemeal while trying to attend classes and do the club, so there!”

“It’s not just his,” said Osman.

“What do you mean?”

“Osman has to be there for the first part, to put his vision power into the object. I estimate only two and a half days for that part. You, on the other hand,” I pointed to Christina, “have to be there the whole time, because I’m making it for you. You’re losing this weird potential force thing that talismans take, not me. This one’s a whopper, given its two functions.”

“Oh.”

“So if mine is ‘ruined’ then so is yours. Besides, I’ll still have most of a week. And I like talisman making, if you’ll recall. I’ve been itching to get back to it and that should satisfy me for a while.”

“I guess if you’re sure.”

“I am. That’ll be a hundred and fifty dollars please, payable in advance.” I held out my hand.

“What?”

“That’s just for the materials. If I was in business for myself I might charge you closer to a thousand for all the work I’m going to be putting in. Plus the research time, insurance fees, convenience charge. But as a student I’m not allowed to do that... not that I would charge a friend, have we met?”

“Very funny. The money isn’t an issue, I just don’t know where to go to get this gold converted.”

“There’s a place on the island...” I started to say, but trailed off. There was a place, given that many demons wanted gold for their services, which was a problem given that gold coins like the ones we had were like dollar bills to them. I mean they had a city covered with the stuff! So usually it was services that were traded, but some demons insisted on the cash. Or gemstones. Or fine clothes or even furniture.

“Right,” she said. “It won’t raise any uncomfortable questions about how a teenager got a handful of gold coins.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Okay, we can take a visit to my foster father’s neighborhood. There’s a gold exchanger near my old house. Kat can make you look older so they don’t ask any questions and that’ll be that. It’ll be nice to visit him again, catch up. My foster father, I mean, not the coin shop.” Of course I had written him frequently over the years, but it wasn’t the same as telling him about my adventures in person.

“I got that.”

“I hope you have a little time left,” said Yasui. “There’s something else you’ll need to be doing over Christmas break.”

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Can we get some privacy, please?” she asked Osman and Christina.

They looked confused.

“Hey, if the members of the Helping People Club have a problem they get the same confidentiality as anyone else,” I said.

“It’s not exactly... just, I’ll tell you in a minute.”

“Okay,” said Osman. “I guess that’s it for today. See you tonight, Dean.”

“Thanks Dean,” said Christina. “We can coordinate our vacation time later. See you around.”

They left, and I looked over at Elizabeth.

“No, she’s staying,” said Yasui.

“Okay, what’s this all about?” I asked, slightly nervous. Both of them suddenly got extremely nervous, looking down and fidgeting.

“As it’s obvious you’re never going to ask either of us out,” said Elizabeth, “we’re forcing the issue. Which one of us do you like better?”

“Liz!” said Yasui. “You can’t just ask stuff like that!”

“Why not? It’s a valid question.”

“Ugh. What she’s trying to say is, we’d like to know if you’d go out with us sometime over Christmas.”

“Unless you don’t like either of us?” Elizabeth said, turning a bit pale. “I mean, it’s okay if you don’t. Maybe you like Osman better, I don’t know. Or you don’t care either way. Or you hate me for hanging around like I do when you never really invited me to and I just sort of signed up for the club without asking but I’ve been working really hard to not be a drag on you guys and I think I’m pulling my weight but maybe you all secretly resent me and-”

“Elizabeth, take a breath!” I commanded. “Yes, I do like both of you. You each have many fine qualities and I’m sure you’ll both find great guys in the future.”

“But not you? You’re pretty great,” protested Yasui.

“It’s just... it’s a lot of things. We were brought together for this weird event that’s coming up, right? The dreamer we met said as much. What happens if we take care of that and poof, we go back to the way things used to be? By now Christina and you would be in your twenties. I would never have met you, because I would still be called Toby and not be an artificer at all.”

“I wouldn’t have my powers,” said Elizabeth.

“Exactly! If our reality goes back to the way it should be, everything changes.”

“We still haven’t found the fox,” Yasui pointed out. “Maybe he was just an insane dreamer and nothing is going to happen.”

“Did you say fox?” Elizabeth now looked worried rather than nervous.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“My inner demon in a fox. A kumiho. That’s why my hair is, you know, like this. I thought you knew, I must have said... didn't I?”

We sat in stunned silence a moment.

“Oh,” said Yasui softly.

“Is that a problem?”

“No, just... you’ve been here the whole time and we never knew it,” I said. “I too thought as long as the fox never showed maybe we were safe, like Yasui said. But our team really is complete, whatever that means.”

“Does this change anything between us?”

“What? No! It just took us by surprise, right Yasui?”

“Right. It’s just a title. What did he call you, Dean?”

“The Watchmaker, I think.”

“Right. See. I was The Conflicted. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“But why would reality change back? That wouldn’t make any sense,” said Elizabeth.

“I don’t know. Nothing about our existence makes sense. We can’t be targeted by seer powers that predict the future, did you know that? Only Osman can, and maybe you, we never tried reading you. We don’t exactly know why, if it was something that dreamer did to increase our chances or just a byproduct of what he did to us.”

“You’ll have to tell me about this dreamer, you haven’t mentioned him to me,” mused Elizabeth.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I’ll fill you in later,” said Yasui. “Even if reality changes later, we have *now*. Why should we let something that might not even happen in the future dictate our actions now?”

“Uh, shoot, there goes my second reason.”

“Which was?”

“In a year and a half we go our separate ways. Graduate, go to college, whatever.”

“Are you going to college?” asked Yasui. “I mean we know what we need to, now, to get hired by the Foundation and work for them. You were even asked last year, right? We’ve done missions in the demon world, for goodness sake. Twice. Not many other applicants will have that on a resumé.”

“I agree. Last year, when I was discussing this with Osman, it made a lot of sense. I didn’t want to start a relationship with someone I figured would end in a year or two.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but we live pretty dangerous lives,” said Elizabeth. “We could date for three years, get married, and then one of us could be killed on a mission a month afterwards. You have to take what time you’re given. I sort of learned that while my classmates were dying left and right after we got powers. I lost almost half my class, you know that?”

“It was that many? It’s just we would lead such different lives. You girls are almost guaranteed to be front line fighters, it’s different for me.” The girls looked at each other and burst out laughing. “What?”

“You’re a front line fighter, Dean, I hate to tell you,” said Yasui, wiping a tear from her eye. “Remember the vessels? You ran towards them, not away.”

“Plus you only know a handful of wards, right?” asked Elizabeth. “Given more time to learn others, you could capture, restrain, destroy, create and more on the battlefield. Plus your little edge that others don’t have that lets you do things like disable vessels. You couldn’t just sit on the sidelines, you’d go nuts.”

“I guess?”

The girls nodded to me.

“And besides,” said Yasui, “we have to protect each other, right? If I’m fighting some demon I want your acceleration wards nearby at the very least. And wouldn’t you feel better knowing you were there, able to watch my back, rather than sitting home someplace wondering if I was okay?”

“I suppose.”

“It’s settled then. As I saw you first, I get first date. Hopefully we can spend a whole day together?” she asked hopefully.

“But you have to spend the same amount of time with me!” said Elizabeth.

“And ultimately choose between you, is that right?”

“Of course,” said the girls together.

“I can’t just have both?” I asked hopefully. “Do you know how many stories, movies, TV shows, etc that could be solved that way?”

“That isn’t how it works, Dean,” said Elizabeth.

“Yeah, you have to choose,” put in Yasui firmly. “*Ryoko or Ayeka*, one or the other.”

“Wait, which of us is Ryoko?”

“Well, I’m the more powerful one. So I’m Ryoko,” said Yasui like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“You’re the most powerful?” sputtered Elizabeth. “I beg to differ!”

“Oh you do, do you?”

Yup, Ryoko and Ayeka all right.

Of course I hadn’t forgotten my wanting to make something for Osman, which I originally thought would be a weapon. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought a shield would be more appropriate. But not just any shield. While I was looking things up for Christina’s new weapon I was also looking for things useful for shields, and I came across something interesting. Basically it turned an attacker’s blows against them, making them injure themselves rather than the intended target. That seemed promising, with only one problem- where to get the shield.

Luckily the alchemy department owed me for all that bloodiron I brought them, so they were more than happy to whip me up a shield made of aluminum. They said they could just as easily do it with titanium or bloodiron, but I was going to increase the toughness of it anyway. It could have been made with paper for all I cared. I just wanted it light enough so he could lift it, and actually use it in combat. The shield would be a talisman, so the protection would be there if he blocked or not. But if he did and the attack was somehow able to penetrate that first defense, at least the shield would take the blow normally.

So they made a project of it, and I ended up with a very nice looking shield. It had an angelic figure as a pattern on the front, as I had told them

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

it was for a petitioner. I sacrificed one of my gold coins and they flattened it out to make a very thin layer of gold for highlights in the image. Polished to a mirror shine it was a real work of art. I thanked them for putting so much work in, and the instructor, Stephen Verochka, said he offered some extra credit for the work based on how well it turned out. The class had jumped at the chance.

“And keep bringing us that bloodiron. You know how useful that stuff is?”

For a real alchemist, undoubtedly it's worth more than its weight in gold. Especially because I keep giving it to them, free.

I wasn't worried about the gold scraping off if it was hit, as making the shield tougher would cause it to return to this exact state no matter how hard you bashed it up, so it would look this way in a thousand years or more. Hey, I built to last!

It took me about a half a week to strengthen the shield, which I had to do away from Osman because it was supposed to be a gift, and that would ruin the surprise. But I managed it, or at least he pretended not to notice that I was gone more often. I mean the guy could see through walls! It took a little more than a week to put the actual power into the shield, and as I did I wondered if this would be handed down in his family, one day becoming an inherited item. It was possible. In any case, I finished just before the school started closing down for Christmas break, and I handed him a wrapped up package before he left.

“You can't open it until the 25th though! See you soon.”

For my part, I just walked back home. This was going to be an interesting “vacation.”

18

If You Want to Date My Daughter

“You must retrieve snow from that mountain.”

--Kyōsuke Kasuga’s Grandfather to his would be father.

Christmas was an odd time for my family. I had only been reunited with them a short time, so we really had no traditions to share. Plus we only spent summers together, and even then I had been down at the school most days. They were busy with work, so we weren’t that close. I think it was with some relief I told them about my plans to work on improving Christina’s focus. My mother particularly, being an artificer herself, was impressed by the item’s scope. They were also eager to meet my friends and the two girls who had roped me into dates.

Not that I minded, as such, but I wasn’t sure how to make the transition from hanging out in the classroom for the Helping People Club to being alone with them. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too awkward, but part of me guessed it was going to be.

My plan was to take Elizabeth to Florida and see the main Disney park, bending the rules a little and getting in with unseen wards. Slightly dishonest, perhaps, but we kept this world safe and ignorant of the real danger it was in, so a little payback I felt was not unjustified. She hadn’t gotten to go the last time, so I figured she would really like that.

Which left me wondering where to take Yasui. I couldn’t take her to the same place, after all. Then I had an inspiration; was there such a thing as a martial arts museum? Turned out there was, in Burbank, California. Their website had pictures of the inside, but not the outside. Street view came to the rescue but showed the building as being tiny. Situated between a dentist and a place that had gone out of business, it was hardly bigger than the car that was outside it. Still, it was a place to start, and we had

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

been many places around the globe for our school field trips. I thought about going back to some of them, maybe taking a closer look at the area surrounding those sites we visited. Visiting for a school trip and visiting with just us two should be different enough, after all.

But that was to come in the second week of vacation, the first was getting Christina's new weapon made. I had given them some wards to teleport back to the island, and they showed up early each morning with a book or something to pass the time. After the initial spirit manipulation to sync our energies, there wasn't much they needed to do as I worked on constructing the talisman. I was pleased to find the first part working perfectly, and we all passed the cross around to see how Osman saw the world.

Then came the hard part, putting the gateway functionality on, and my mother checked in on that part from time to time. She was impressed with my work, saying it was far above her own, and wondered if I had some sort of supernatural skill for making talismans like some people did for playing violin or piano. I told her I had no idea but talisman making seemed to come naturally to me, and I had picked it up fast.

After the week had passed the item was done, sitting there at the center of a sheet of paper as the energy faded from around the focus. My father created a dummy person made of rock out of the basement floor, and Christina reattached the cross to her wrist.

"Here goes nothing," she said. We went outside and looked down towards the basement as she manifested the bow, then let an arrow fly. I was pleased to see it vanish and Christina smiled, putting the bow away.

"It worked perfectly," she said happily. "I got it right through his head. Of course I didn't put any energy into the attack just in case it went bad, but that proves it works."

"As if there was some doubt."

"I'm forced to admit, you do good work. Thanks, Dean."

"My pleasure. Have fun with it! And by have fun, I mean slaughter those that would use their wicked ways to corrupt the souls of man!"

She laughed. "Will do. Good luck with your *daaaaaates*."

She had to bring that up, didn't she?

Christmas day I got a text from Osman, thanking me for the shield. I texted him back.

Wait until you see what it can do. Set it down and have Kat punch a hole through it with cohesion.

Barely scratched it! Amazing. She's torn through tank armor with that technique in class. Messed up the finish. :(Can you fix it?

Wait for it.

It's repaired itself! Like it was never scratched.

Naturally. It has one more property I'll explain when I see you. It takes two to demonstrate.

This is really great. Thanks.

Of course, Merry Christmas.

And so Yasui showed up for our date three days later. It was one in the afternoon, and we planed to spend the whole day together. We were going to accomplish this by starting in California, four time zones away, where it was now 9:00 in the morning. Then follow the sun around the globe to the various places I had planned for us to go see. After about 12 hours, no matter what time it was locally, we would come back.

She was wearing a white dress that fell just above the knee, and looked more Chinese than Japanese. It had roses and other flowers down the front, and had tiny sleeves that barely covered the shoulder. It was trimmed in green, and she had a green bracelet on her left arm. She was also, I was surprised to see, wearing makeup.

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.

She was carrying a small clutch, and looked very nervous. I suppose I did too. Imagine, people who had faced down death on several occasions, fought with demons, talked to angels, *saved the world*, feeling nervous because of spending some time together. I noticed she wasn't wearing heels, heeding my advice, we might be doing a lot of walking. It was strange to see her legs uncovered though, usually she was clanking around in those boots of hers.

Wonder if I could make a variant of the contain ward that allowed her to carry the boots, get the benefit of them, but not actually wear them?

"Oh, uh, come in!" I finally said, realizing I was just standing there.

"Thanks."

"You aren't using some kind of ward or shape-shift power, are you? Because you can't be this pretty normally. I would have noticed."

Wait, did that come out right? Stupid, Dean. Stupid!

Yasui still smiled. "Nope, it's still me. You just don't see me in normal clothes, that's all. Usually it's just the school uniform."

"I guess. Well, you look great!"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Thanks. You do too.”

But I knew she was just being nice.

“Ah, my parents want to meet you. Do you mind?”

“Actually, mine want to meet you too. And I think they have something weird in mind.”

“Weird is right where I feel at home. Come on, they’re down in the lab.”

I introduced her to my parents, and my father gave me an approving nod and a wink, then a thumbs up when my mother and her were talking. I shook my head.

After they had spoken a moment they told us to have fun, and we went back upstairs and out of the house.

“I’m really sorry, but we have to go back to Japan before we go anywhere. My parents made me promise to bring you to meet them before we went anywhere else.”

“That’s fine, I’d be happy to meet them.” I handed her another teleport ward.

Now don’t screw this up, Dean!

We stepped through, and Yasui headed for her house. We were nearby, but in a narrow alleyway no one would see us emerge from.

Her house was pretty small, which was typical of Japan, and the buildings here were spaced very close together. I could see skyscrapers in the distance on both sides, and felt as if I was being squeezed between two cities.

“Don’t be nervous,” Yasui murmured to me as she opened the door and yelled something in Japanese.

I wasn’t that nervous until just now, thank you very much.

A stern looking man and woman about my parent’s age emerged from the back of the house. I started to step in but Yasui held me back and held up a pair of slippers.

Oh right, the Japanese do things a little differently.

We changed out of our shoes and into the slippers, then Yasui went over to her parents. She jabbered at them in Japanese and turned to me.

“Dean, these are my parents. You should address them as Yamashita-san.”

“Douzo yoroshiku, onegaishimasu.” I butchered, bowing. Hey, I looked it up.

Yasui’s mother grinned at me, and her father looked a little sick. “Don’t try too hard,” he said. “Welcome to my home. Please, I have tea prepared.” He indicated the table in the center of the room.

Ah, Japanese tea! I thought sarcastically to myself, knowing I was a doomed man. *Good thing I watched that old Karate Kid movie which I'm sure is 100% accurate to modern Japanese life. Woo-hoo!*

We both sat down on our knees (also, ow) and he waited, unspeaking.

Yasui and her mother knelt over by the wall and watched me.

Great, no help there.

I poured the tea, probably improperly, but I poured his first because I'm not an idiot.

We drank.

What does he want from me? I thought at Yasui, using sending. She gave a little shrug and shake of her head. *Super. Don't need mind reading to interpret that.* I wondered for a second why I had never picked up mind reading, but then remembered it took skill in ESP I could never attain. Right.

Mr Yamashita put down his cup. "So you wish to date my daughter?" he asked.

"In all honesty, sir, she wishes to date me. I feel our futures are too uncertain, at this time, to date. However, she insisted."

He said something in Japanese.

"It's not the 70s anymore, father," Yasui answered in English. "And it's rude to speak a language not everyone in the room knows."

"You see what she has become?" he asked his wife.

She raised an eyebrow. "You think it's the influence of this boy?" she asked.

"What else could it be?"

"No matter what the cause, I am pleased. You know how mopey she was before, how she did not care if she trained or not. Now she has embraced her destiny as a martial artist and strives to surpass even you."

He turned back to me. "I still would know the sort of man you are. I am told you are an artificer."

"That is correct, sir. Among other things."

"So Yasui has said. She speaks very highly of you, though I am sure half of her stories are embellished. You can tell a man by what he creates. Come, show me the fruit of your art." He stood, and I stood as well. *Thank goodness, my legs are not used to that. Show him the 'fruit of my art', huh? Very well.*

"Regeneration. Armor." I said, activating but two of my talismans. Obviously it would be silly to go anywhere without them, and I was wearing all of them, as usual. energy flashed and was gone. I stepped in front of him.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“If you would be so kind, please hit me.”

“You know I am a true martial artist of some renown? Are you sure?”

I hope so. But my armor has taken a gunshot, right? I recalled it saving me from being stabbed...

I indicated my chest, and he said “Very well,” and slugged me.

I felt he was holding back, and my armor took the blow, flashing at the point of impact and protecting me.

“Of course,” he said, “in a real combat situation I would be trying much harder.”

“In a real combat situation I wouldn’t just be standing here,” I argued. “Acceleration.” I started blurring. “Try to hit me again.”

He stepped back into a fighting stance and attacked much faster this time. But he still looked like he was going in slow motion from my perspective.

I dodged several of his attacks, though not by much in some cases, my armor took one or two more hits. Finally he stopped.

“I see. But defense is meaningless without attack.”

“Yamashita-san, if I attacked you in even the slightest way, you would die. I do not have any nonlethal attacks.” *Well, I suppose combust is somewhat non-lethal.*

“That’s easily solved. Spirit clone!” Suddenly there were two of him standing there.

Oh yeah, she did say that was a secret technique of her family. Though really, any true martial artist could learn it.

“Not here,” I said. “I don’t want to destroy your beautiful house.”

“Nor will you have to,” he said, taking a flat metal disk off a nearby shelf. “As an artificer I’m sure you’re at least familiar with something like this?” He set it on the table and said “Battlefield.”

I suddenly found myself in a dojo. It was a simple wooden affair, with a marked off ring in the center as a large red, painted rectangle.

Ah, much like the spell we were caught up in, fighting those vessels that one time, back in the past.

“I am, sir. This must come in very handy for you, given how crowded Japan is.”

“Indeed. Shall we?”

His clone and I both took up positions in the center, and bowed to each other. Yasui, the original, and his wife took up positions along the walls. I didn’t have to worry about holding back here. I could neither permanently damage the area or him. As long as I controlled my wind blasts, anyway.

Now why do I get the sudden feeling I'm Yuffie and at the top of the pagoda? If he shouts "Omni Change" I'm out of here.

He went back into a fighting pose but I didn't bother with niceties like that. I dodged backward and created a wind burst two meters above his head, making it 6 meters across, figuring that would just miss me. I was right, and the wind slammed into him despite doing something to dodge. I felt him use spiritual energy but couldn't see exactly what he intended.

I was rather surprised to barely see him wince, he didn't seem that injured. Of course his clothes were all torn up.

Of all the nerve! He must have increased his toughness for a second there, didn't Yasui once say she could do that?

What I didn't expect to see was another copy of him, off to my left. That one was totally uninjured, and both were still coming towards me.

Uh, what?

Well, he was still moving in slow motion so I did what any sensible person would do in that situation- I called out an ignore ward from my pouch. He took another step in slow motion so I stuck it to myself and used grasshopper's leap to get into a different position. The two smoothy went back to back, looking around to see where I'd gone. They were now at one end of the ring and I was at the other, so I wind blasted them again, this time starting the blast between their feet. I of course went visible as my ward burned away.

It was actually hard to follow exactly what they did, with the air blast and their own powers doing something, but when it cleared I had three figures facing me now from different points in the ring. One looked like he escaped unscathed, while the other two looked like they were in a lot of pain. Both had their clothes torn up.

Great, so every time they dodge there's another one of them? From where I was I could see Yasui, and she had a thoughtful look on her face. No help there. But there must be a limit, if it's like spirit clone, he'll be dragging. Okay, let's do something he can't see coming then. I chose the one that didn't seem that hurt and used combust, targeting his chest. I put energy into my will and visualized heat taking him down. His skin cracked and burned. *Ah, can't put energy into your defense if you can't see it coming, can you? Or are you running low on energy?*

I risked a quick spirit viewing, the only seer technique I had picked up, that let me actually see spirit energy rather than just feeling it. It wasn't as good as what Osman could do, but it was enough. I realized two of the

figures before me were almost out of energy, but one still had a good amount. *So you won't be boosting your defenses like that much longer.*

Two of them, the one I had just burned and the one to my left darted forward. I put energy into my will and threw up a barrier, bouncing them both back, though they tried to chop through it. The other was a step behind them, and also tried chopping through.

He parted the barrier and slipped inside. *Crap.*

With one inside I was sunk, with the barrier up I couldn't do anything else. I dropped it and decided to distract him a bit, concentrating on setting his hair on fire.

It worked, but I didn't expect him to scream and start flailing his arms.

His two clones paused, looking over at him, and Yasui shook her head.

"Really, father?" she asked.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," he replied.

The other two recovered and lunged for me, forcing me to dodge out of the way. I did not want to get hit by this guy.

I managed the dodge, and as the clone pulled back to try again, it disappeared.

Huh?

The other one was still on me and took another swing, causing me to dodge again.

I ducked under his attack and skirted the edge of the ring, but that one vanished too.

"Enough," said Mr Yamashita, looking at his final clone that was still panicking and flailing about. It vanished.

Yes! Finishing move! Victory music started playing in my head. *I guess that one was the original?*

"You have now seen my ultimate technique," said Mr Yamashita to Yasui. "Must I explain it or have you an idea how I was able to do this?"

"I think I saw what you did. Turning phantom step into that- I wouldn't have thought of it."

"Then this battle was not wasted. Chesterfield-san," he said, bowing to me. "You handled yourself well. I thought only those with years of dedicated training could move so quickly, but if that was a talisman you have indeed mastered the craft. I admit I had my doubts, but even though you are not a martial artist, I will allow you to date my daughter."

He pulled the disk from his pocket and deactivated it. We reappeared where we had been when it was activated, and he put it back on the shelf it had been on.

He left the room without saying another word.

Yasui's mother hugged her, murmured something, and went after him.

"Let's go!" said Yasui happily, grabbing my hand and pulling me towards the door.

"So what was that technique?" I asked when we were outside again.

"It's partly a technique called phantom step. It works like spirit step, allowing you to move to a new location instantly. You've seen me using it, I think." I thought so too. I had seen others use it, but never picked it up myself. I figured my talisman was already making me fast enough. "However, with this technique you leave behind an image of yourself. I always thought it was stupid, because the image can't move. There's nothing controlling it."

"And anyone can tell one of you is just standing there and one of you is not?" I guessed.

"Exactly. But he seems to have combined it with our spirit clone technique, leaving a clone behind instead. They didn't seem to last that long though."

"Oh, it wasn't the damage they had taken that made them disappear?"

"No, their time ran out. I was feeling them out, you were probably a bit busy."

"Yeah. I can't believe he survived my wind blasts."

"He let his clone take them and dodged out of the way. He was putting energy into his defense at the time, and facing another close combat fighter, that would be the way to go."

"I figured."

"He gets to surprise his opponent by shrugging off the blow, and has another copy of himself to help beat them down. But I think I can do him one better."

"Oh yeah? Do tell!"

"Enough shop talk. Let me work it out first, run it by my teachers, see if they think it'll work. For now, get out that ward and let's go see this museum of yours!"

Sword of Destiny

“This is the destiny the sword has chosen for me!” --G.O.B Arrested Development.

As it showed in the picture, the place was narrow, but long in the back. I paid our fee to get inside, \$8 apiece because we were considered “adults.”

“Tell that to my dad,” said Yasui, glaring angrily at the sign. “Honestly, making you fight him before he would let me go on this date with you.”

“You do not truly know someone, until you fight them,” I said, trying to sound like that guy in the Matrix.

“Please,” she laughed. “But I do appreciate you trying a little Japanese.”

“Once I’m not busy learning stuff to survive this *event* that’s coming I’ll make up a talisman like the principal has, and be able to understand and communicate in any language. Then it won’t matter.”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course. Talisman. Silly of me to think there wasn’t one already in mind.”

“Sorry.”

We went inside, and saw there were few people there, which was fine. The place was actually pretty interesting. There were posters, weapons, and many historical accounts written on plaques which dotted the walls. We wandered around, with Yasui occasionally saying things like “I thought that was the other way around,” and “They got that wrong!” I deferred to her knowledge. However, she kept coming back to an old katana, displayed alone in a glass case. Next to it was a description of where it came from and why it was here.

Haunted Blade?

This katana, believed to have been created in the late Muromachi period, early 1500s, has changed hands many times. Each owner had the blade only a short time before they complained of strange events surrounding it and sold it off again.

It went on to detail how such blades were made and how they were able to trace it throughout history. Apparently, each person that owned it added their names to a list, which was copied onto new paper many times through history as it fell apart. I couldn't imagine why anyone would go to the trouble, but the list was right there in the case, printed out, of course, with a modern printer.

It showed the last person to own it had donated it to the museum just two years ago, and here it had sat ever since.

"You're a kick master," I joked to Yasui as she stared at the blade for the third time. "Not a sword user. What's up?"

"Can't you feel it? It's supernaturally active."

"What?" I reached out with my senses and found she was right, there was something odd going on with the blade. "Hey, you're right!"

"You don't think it's cursed, do you? That's why it changed hands so many times?"

"Can't say. I've only dealt with that one cursed object, and that was new. Not hundreds of years old."

"Can you... tell?"

I crossed my arms and looked at the blade. I shrugged, then put my hand on the glass. Closing my eyes, I tried reaching out with ESP. This skill I couldn't make better by dumping energy into my will, so I didn't expect much. It was based more on listening to my feelings than actively willing reality to change because I wanted it to. I didn't get much, but I did feel a very strong sense of frustration from nearby.

"It's frustrated," I said.

"What? The sword? How can a sword be frustrated?"

"Don't look at me. I'm just telling you what I feel. Anyway it's been here two years and nothing's happened. Leave it."

"Come on, Dean. We have to look into this!"

"Okay, but how? I mean it's just a sword, safely tucked away in a museum. What are we going to do about it?"

"Look," she said, pointing. "The last name on the list. We could go track that guy down and figure out why he gave it up!"

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I suppose that’s doable. Odd that they just left the names on there, anyone could look it up.”

“Come on.” Yasui guided me to a bench and we sat down. She pulled out her cell phone and started doing a search for someone named Reginald Connell.

She messed around for about a half hour, which I patiently waited through, looking around. Finally she nodded.

“I think I’ve got him. There were two thousand hits on his name alone, but only ten that also referenced swords. Apparently he’s a collector from Ohio, because he has a website that shows part of his collection.” She showed me the phone. “See? Knowing that I put his name into the whitepages site with his state, and there’s only one person with his name living there. Let’s go check the place out!”

“Switch over to street view, I can’t just wish us to where he is.”

“Oh, right.” She showed me the outside of his house, which was a typical suburban home. “Let’s go!”

“Or,” I said, putting a finger up, “we could do it the smart way.”

“What’s that?”

I pointed over to the bathrooms and handed her a ward. “Head to the bathroom. We’ll make a spirit clone each and send them to Ohio. Based on what they learn, we can take action here if we decide we need to. Plus, if we just disappeared from this place they would start to search. The owners probably count the people in and out to make sure it closes empty.”

“You’re so smart. Okay! What’s the ward for?”

“Teleport there. Just envision the front of that house and I’ll be right behind you.” She didn’t look convinced. “That way you won’t be coming out of the bathroom twice. I’ll want that back though.”

“But I’ll have- my clone will have used it! Good thinking! You get to use a ward but you don’t actually lose it.”

“I’ve been thinking about other ways to capitalize on knowing this technique, it’s quite useful. I should thank the person that taught it to me.”

She grinned at me. “You’re welcome.” She skipped lightly off to the bathroom, and I got up and followed her.

I made a clone and it went on its way, and Yasui and I went back to looking around the museum.

Meanwhile our clones arrived in Ohio without incident, and went up to the house.

At least this one doesn’t look like it was ransacked two days ago, like the last time we went looking for something.

We both stepped up to the door, and I took a step back. Yasui looked back at me in a panic.

“What are you doing?”

“This is your project, you get to take the lead in talking to these people. It’s a new thing I’m trying, pretending I’m not the center of the universe. Interested to see how it works out.”

Her eyes got wide and she quickly shook her head back and forth. “No, no, no, I can’t do that. I can’t just knock on these people’s door and talk to them. No, you’re going to have to do that.”

“Yasui, you’ve defended our group against those guys who wanted that golem we stole, who you knew were way better than us. You helped saved my parents, and who knew how that could have gone? You’re telling me you can’t say to these people ‘Hi, I’m Yasui, and I just happened to learn you donated a sword to a martial arts museum that was supposed to be haunted. The sword, not the museum. I love haunted stuff, can you tell me about it?’”

“Oh, you make it sound easy.”

“Yasui, are you... shy? All this time I’ve been thinking you’re Applejack but really you’re cute little *Fluttershy*? Oh my goodness!”

“I just have trouble meeting new people, that’s all! You don’t notice normally because I’ve got the whole group usually and I can hang back a little but this is totally different!”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, very well.” I rang the bell and she scooted behind me, trying to make herself appear even smaller than she was. “Oh, *Fluttershy*,” I said softly.

Wait a second- Fluttershy is yellow, the color we associate with being a coward. Mind. Blown. The door opened.

“Yes?” said the woman who answered the door, looking down at us. She was obviously past retirement age, but not old enough to need assistance getting around. Her hair was greying, and she was a bit plump.

“Sorry to bother you, Mrs Connell. I’m Dean Chesterfield, and this is Yasui Yamashita. We’re here to speak to your husband, Reginald, about a sword.”

“He’s out at the moment,” she said.

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen. “Will he be back this afternoon? It’s just, we’ve come a long way. It’s about that sword he donated to the museum in California a few years ago.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Did something happen? Oh, I told him he should just melt it down!”

“That would have been unfortunate, it’s a beautiful example of the period. No, we don’t know of anything happening yet, but we’d like to take a few precautions to make sure something doesn’t happen in the future. I hoped if we could talk to him about what he experienced, it might shed some light on exactly what we were dealing with.”

“You don’t seriously believe there’s a... ghost?” She gave a little laugh.

“I am quite serious about believing it, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

She sighed, then looked us over. We were wearing our ‘date clothes’ of course, which lent us some air of authority. After all, you would react differently if a person in smudged, torn clothing came to your door than if a well dressed person showed up. Even though both might mean you the same level of harm. And of course I had known her husband’s name, and about the sword. We were awful young looking though, Yasui more than most because she was so short. We couldn’t pass for adults, that was sure. She seemed to decide.

“Come in.”

She showed us to the basement, and yes, this guy was a collector of old swords. Some were hung on walls, some in cases. Taller ones stood in stands. The upstairs of the house was totally normal, not a sword to be found. “Have a seat,” she said, getting out her cell phone. “I’ll text him, he was just walking the dog.”

She did, then sat opposite us on a stuffed armchair.

“So who are you two, and what are you doing investigating a haunted sword?”

I felt Yasui stiffen, and if I could read her thoughts they might have been racing to think about what we could tell her. Thankfully, I had come prepared.

“We represent a group called the Orion’s Huntsmen. We’re scattered all about the world, and we get new members because the world is full of odd and dangerous things. Most members,” I sighed, “have some kind of tragedy in their lives. A ghost killing a family member, for instance, or someone disappearing and being found later, drained of blood. Obviously we’re just kids, we don’t go after that sort of thing. We just get to do the research before the more experienced people step in. You didn’t hear this from me,” I lowered my voice, and she leaned forward a little, “but the world of the supernatural is closer than you might think.”

Of course, all of this is true. There is a group called Orion's Huntsman, Elizabeth told us about tangling with them back in her old neighborhood. Even killed a spirit hunter, the idiots, calling them "soul jumpers." We've heard about them in school, having just enough knowledge to be dangerous but not enough power to take on anything really serious. The spirit hunter they killed was projecting at the time, and they just stabbed her body. Too bad she didn't have the greatest talisman maker in the world to make her something to help with that little flaw. More of them have gotten killed then we care to count, but the Foundation can't really put a stop to it because their members are all over the place, just moving around. No central structure, like with the Society. Never thought I would be claiming to be a member though. I straightened up. "So yes, trust me when I say that I believe you. Our group has taken it upon themselves to track this sort of thing down and make sure others don't wind up like us. The things we've seen." I shook my head sadly. "So, anything you can tell me about the blade, that would be a big help."

"What will you do, if there's a ghost, I mean?"

"There are certain rituals of purification, if it's evil. Many times a ghost just feels they must accomplish some task before they move on, but time has passed them by and that can no longer happen. Those are harder, I don't know what happens to ghosts we force to stop haunting the Earth, but hopefully they move on appropriately." Just to totally sell the image I made the sign of the cross. She stared at us.

"If I hadn't seen it myself I would have said you were crazy."

"I've heard that many times. What did you see?"

"It was my husband. He started acting very strange after he got that sword. He laughed at the list but one night he found himself writing his name on it. He erased it the next day, then the day after that he found himself writing it again. There were strange noises in the house, and the sword wouldn't stay put. I told him he was leaving it out, but he insisted he wasn't. It was like he was sleepwalking with it, and he kept mumbling about finding someone. I caught him with it twice, but he still insisted he never touched it. About two months after he bought it we came home to find someone breaking in and trying to steal it. He dropped it and ran, and we never found out who it was. It was a summer's evening then, but I remember the house being so cold."

I looked at Yasui, who nodded.

"Sounds like a ghost to me," I said. "Seems as though it wants to take the sword somewhere. I can't imagine where though."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Hello?” a voice shouted from upstairs, and sounds of a dog running around could be heard.

“Oh, just a minute. We’re down here, honey,” she said, getting up and going over to the stairs.

“Oh, hello!” said the man, coming down the stairs. He too was a bit portly, with thinning grey hair and a wide smile. “Name’s Reginald, call me Reggie.” He stuck his hand out.

I shook it, and so did Yasui, and we introduced ourselves.

A tiny white dog excitedly tore down the stairs and started prancing about, trying to get Yasui to pet her.

Flutterrrrrshyyyyyyyyyy.

“So you’re on the track of that haunted sword, huh? You’re too late though!”

“They know where it is,” Mrs Connell told him. “I wouldn’t have let them in otherwise.”

“Oh, they’re harmless, aren’t you?” He laughed.

Uh, no? Not exactly. In fact not even remotely, either of us.

“So my wife’s been telling you all about it, then?”

“That’s right. Pretty standard story, actually.”

“Is that right? You two some kind of ghost hunters?” He laughed again.

“Something like that,” I said smiling. “We just wanted to know if what you experienced with the sword was the typical haunting. It seems it was, unless there are more disturbing events she hasn’t told us.”

“You told them about the break in, and how I was always writing my name on that stupid list?”

She nodded.

“Some strange noises sometimes too. And once or twice I could have sworn I saw a samurai pacing around here. Was never there when I looked, though.”

“Okay. It seems harmless enough, but that ghost has been wandering around the Earth for five hundred years. I think he deserves a rest.”

“And you think you two can do it?”

“We’ll pass the information on to our agents in California. We’re not headed in that direction presently.” *We’re clones, we’ll just dissipate back into spirit energy.* “They’re a good team, I’m sure they’ll take care of something as simple as this fairly easily.”

Yasui smiled, we were a good team.

“Hope the museum doesn’t give you any trouble,” said Mr Connell, showing us out.

“Not to worry sir, they won’t even know our people are there.”

Literally.

“Nice to have met you both. Let me know how it turns out, okay? And next time don’t let him do all the talking!” he said to Yasui, who blushed and looked down. He laughed again, waved, and closed the door.

“Guess that’s it,” I said to Yasui, walking down the street away from the house.

“Now we just need to find a place to vanish from.”

“It’s weird, casually talking about... well, basically killing ourselves.”

“Think of it as just teleporting back to where our other selves are, who will now have two sets of memories.”

“I know. It’s just not something you discuss every day, you know?”

“Yeah. How about over there?” She pointed to a mobile home that was parked up against a garage. “We could squeeze in there, and no one would see us disappear.”

“Okay.”

We squished ourselves between the two and waited a moment to make sure no one came running to find out what we were doing back there. No one did, and so we nodded to each other and vanished.

“Fluttershy!?” I said, suddenly getting the memories of what my clones had done in Ohio.

“You better not tell anyone,” threatened Yasui with a smile.

“All the stallions say you’re pretty shy for a pegasi.”

“Shut up!” She lightly punched my arm.

“Hey, I think it’s cute.”

“Really?” Yasui looked thoughtful.

“Okay. So the blade does seem haunted. Now what?”

“I think we’ll have to... borrow it,” said Yasui.

“Borrow?”

“Sure. You don’t see the ghost wandering around here, do you? I think someone has to touch the blade for it to manifest. Or maybe it’s just asleep because it’s been locked up for so long.”

“Okay. We can at least take a look without so many eyes on us.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“What eyes? There’s hardly anyone here!”

“Cameras, Yasui. Cameras. Come on.”

I led her outside, then we went around to the back of the building. I slapped some ignore wards on us, and we phased through the wall, walking back towards the case.

“But how are we going to get it?” she asked.

“Leave that to me!”

I got out another ignore ward and slapped that on the case, and Yasui nodded. As the ward activated I imagined it burning up after three days, revealing the case again. No sense letting it go to waste, and the sword would either be back or long gone before then.

Now the tricky part.

I just wanted to remove enough of the glass to shift the lock out of position. Glass didn’t weigh that much, thankfully. I touched the point I wanted to dissolve and envisioned it moving out of the way in a ‘glassy’ way. This was another skill I couldn’t exactly will to happen, I had to reason out how the glass molecules would slide past each other.

The glass remained in place.

I scowled, then tried again. I thought I felt it move just a little, but stubbornly sat there not having budged any to the naked eye. I took a deep breath and tried again. No movement. I knew that if I got lucky I could, one time in ten, move about 10kg of material around. Nothing for it, I tried again.

My persistence was rewarded, and the glass harmlessly bent away and I shifted the lock enough to carefully open the case. On camera, or to anyone looking our way, their eyes would just slide past us like we didn’t exist. As the sword was in the case and the case was being ignored, I could easily lift it out and grabbed up the list for good measure. I closed the glass, didn’t want it to swing open and smack someone, now did I?

Immediately after touching the sword and grabbing the list the surrounding air started to get colder.

“It’s coming,” I said, looking around.

Suddenly there was a figure before us, a warrior that it seemed had been killed in battle. There was a sword wound in his chest and many cuts and scrapes along his arms.

The figure looked around wildly, as if seeking the sword. Of course, the ghost couldn’t perceive us any better than anyone else at the moment.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Is this going to work? I thought. “*Calm yourself,*” I thought at him with sending. It seemed to work, but only served to make him more agitated. He said something in Japanese. *Duh, of course he’s not going to know English.*

“Yasui, what do I say to him?” I asked.

“Have him meet us out back. Say this...” She rattled off some Japanese, and I told her to slow down and say it a few more times. The ghost finally got the message and we went outside again, around the back where the ghost was waiting. We took off the ignore wards and he looked down at us. He spoke more Japanese, and Yasui talked to him for a few minutes. Finally she turned back to me.

“He keeps saying he has to get the blade back to his son. I keep trying to tell him his son is long dead, but he insists.”

“Great. He’s stuck, so what are we going to do about it?”

“Don’t you know some skill to send him on?”

“Sure! I could try passing. I learned the theory behind it, the only spirit hunter technique they would share with me. I’ve never really done it, though. Or I could just grab him up with soul extracting and shove him through a portal like I was going to do with those other souls. Problem is, I don’t know what plane he’s destined for, so I can’t take the chance he’ll go to the wrong one! And bypassing the normal soul cycle can have consequences.”

“But passing would work, right?”

“Maybe. You have to keep in mind though, he’s been here hundreds of years. He’s not going to go willingly, and I don’t know his language. You’d have to coach me on what to say, and I don’t know if that would even work!”

“Oh. You think we could find his son’s grave or something?”

“That’s going to be a long shot after this long. I think we’ll just have to take it to the school and wait a few days until everyone gets back. We’ll have a seer deal with it.”

“Is there really nothing we can do?”

“We could head to Japan, try to convince him he’s not in Kansas anymore.”

“Let’s try that.”

“You’re the boss.” I threw down a teleport ward, going back to Yasui’s house, as that’s the place I most recently saw. “Wait, can he go through this?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Yasui asked him.

“He said he’ll go wherever the sword goes.”

“Super. Come along.”

We stepped through.

“Hey, how do you turn it off?” Yasui asked suddenly. “We don’t want to leave that ward just sitting there. I just picked up the other one as I stepped into the circle so it would burn up behind me. I never thought about it before!”

“You can specify the time they last when you activate them,” I explained. “So I just turn them on for a minute at most. They burn up afterwards, no evidence. I’ve always done that. Sorry, it slipped my mind to tell you.”

“Oh, that’s okay.”

Yasui showed the ghost the cities in the distance, but apparently he was adamant his son existed. “You don’t think he means some sort of descendant, do you?” she asked.

“Oh, that would be just what we needed. Trying to find some random person in all of Japan. His family name might not have even survived, if his ancestors only had girls along the way. Or it might have died out completely. Or moved to the states, who knows!”

“Why does this blade have to go back to his son, though? That’s what I don’t understand.”

I looked the blade over, then did a spirit sense on it.

“Yasui, he’s out here now, but the blade still feels supernatural. I think it’s some kind of talisman. Ask him what the blade could do.”

She did.

“Yeah, it’s a talisman, or was,” she replied after getting his answer. “Cost him a small fortune and many months to make.”

“I see. Okay, we’ll have to get it back then. How though?”

We went inside to think about it, and Yasui’s parents came back out, surprised to see us back so soon. As she explained to them and they exclaimed over the ghost, I paced back and forth thinking about things. I didn’t want to do it, but it seemed like an emergency.

I pulled out my magic book and sat down on the floor, getting comfortable. Yasui knew what I was doing, she kept her parents away from me during the spell casting.

Thirty minutes later there was a burst of fire, and Iris was there looking around.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Ah, I thought it would be you,” he said, spying me. “What’s up?”

“I don’t suppose you know a spell to find the owner of an item, do you?”

“Not off talon, no. Why?”

I thumbed the ghost.

“Oh, I see. Better give me the highlights.”

I showed him the sword. “This is some sort of talisman, what would have become an inherited item, hundreds of years ago. But apparently he was killed before he could pass it down. Now it’s being haunted by his ghost who insists his son is around, which we think is just some distant relative, but good enough for the inheriting to work. So I thought if you knew that spell, you could figure his name out for us, or at least a direction to go.”

“How did you come by the sword?”

“That’s the other problem. It was donated to a museum, after being passed around like a hot potato since he was killed. Because, you know, haunting? Why do you ask?”

“Because the spell I’m familiar with is one that finds the true owner.”

“Does it have an owner? It was donated to a place, not a person.”

“That might be the only thing that saves us. Wait, did you steal it?”

“I borrowed it. I had hoped to get him to pass on and then take it back. If he needs it to go to someone permanently though, that’s going to be a problem. They won’t notice it’s gone for several days, we could make a replica somehow.”

“True. I could make one with magic. I’ll have to bring back the creation spell, too.”

“You would be willing to try?”

“Sure. It’s pretty tough to get me here, though, isn’t it?”

“Not exactly, just long. I started a half hour ago!”

“Hummm. Wasn’t dimension gate included in your spells?”

“Yes. You want me to open a Heaven portal- right here?”

“If you think you’re strong willed enough not to step through it. I can head to the library and be back before you would be able to summon me back.”

“That’s a grade 10 spell you know, and I’m already dragging from keeping you here. Wait, I could send you back and then open it!”

“Yeah, that’ll work. This is Japan? Let me take a quick peak outside.” He did. “I can find my way back here.”

“Great, thanks a lot. This will really help. Yasui really wanted this

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

guy to move on. And then we found out his descendants should all have been supernatural, like us.”

“I can understand that, they did get cheated a little, didn’t they? Okay, see you shortly.”

“Oh, I’ll open the portal in... twenty minutes.” I glanced at the clock on my phone. “Don’t need that extra temptation, right? So stick around if you get back before then.”

“Got it.”

I released the spell and he vanished.

“You talk to phoenixes, too?” asked Mr Yamashita, coming back into the room.

“Sometimes it’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” I said with a grin. “Not all phoenixes, actually, I’ve, uh, been given special dispensation to talk to that one.”

“Given what? Sorry, my English is a bit rusty.”

“Oh sorry. Special permission.”

“Ah, I see. And did I hear you were going to open a portal to Heaven?”

“It’s a shorter spell, but harder. I just have to put more energy into it. Uh, don’t tell anyone I can do magic, by the way. I sort of got permission for that from Heaven, too.”

“No wonder you beat me so easily, you have the Heavens on your side. I would welcome you into my family should you marry my daughter.”

“Dad!” shouted Yasui shrilly.

“Ah, thank you. Excuse me, I have to look over this spell before I cast it.”

“Of course. Don’t let me disturb you.”

Twenty minutes later there was a shimmering portal to Heaven smack in the middle of the room, and I was getting a bit tired out. All the wards I had activated and other little drabs of energy I had been spending that day were adding up, and spell casting really took it out of me. I turned away from the portal so I was not too tempted to step through. I could feel the joy and light radiating out of it though, so even with my eyes tightly closed I could feel its pull.

I don’t know how much time passed, but I finally felt something hard poking me.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I’m here. Let’s go to the other room.”

“Right.”

“Weird, never been here physically before,” he said, looking around. “Guess being more vulnerable makes me see things differently.”

Iris used creation to fashion a likeness of the sword, but not the scabbard. “You can find another one of those. If I don’t get it right it’ll look new, and someone might be more inclined to investigate. Best to leave that original. It’s not like someone’s going to draw it, if it’s in a case in a museum.”

“Couldn’t you make a new scabbard?” Yasui asked, “for the old sword? We just switch them after we hand over the full package and our ghost friend is gone.”

“That’s reasonable. Hang on.” He made one, then wanted some quiet as he read over the descry owner spell.

“The ghost is actually quite talkative,” Yasui said quietly, watching Iris work. “He’s been telling us about the battle that got him killed, and about life in ancient Japan. It’s really interesting. I mean it’s one thing to listen to someone lecturing about it, and another to talk to someone that actually lived through it! I’m going to have to use the Time Frame sometime and see some of the things he’s been telling us about.”

“Life must have been very different back then.”

“Life wasn’t so different, but living was. People still met, fell in love... though I suppose it was more arranged marriages, but you know what I mean. People still just did the best they could with what they had, same as today.”

“You’re right.”

We watched Iris cast, and finally after ten minutes he had a result for us. “He’s about two hundred kilometers that way,” he said pointing, and rattled off a Japanese name Yasui wrote down. “Hope that helps.”

“Thanks, that helps a lot,” said Yasui, smiling. “You’re the best, Iris.”

“Well, I... thank you. I’m glad to help. Hope to see you in Heaven soon,” he said to the ghost.

“May we see the portal?” asked Mrs Yamashita.

“I guess, but I’m closing it just after he goes back through. If you’re not on this side you get stuck there forever.”

“I don’t recommend it,” said Iris.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“I know.”

So we walked back to the other room, and they exclaimed over the portal. Iris dove back through and I stopped maintaining the spell, closing it.

From there it was a simple matter to track down the right person and present him with the sword. He was in his thirties, but he had an 8 year old son, which was lucky as the sword could now be passed down properly. As soon as he drew it out it blazed with light, and the man exclaimed he saw the ghost. We turned and watched as the ghost bowed, then faded away.

“He’s finally gone home,” said Yasui, smiling.

The man seemed to be in shock, not surprising, and Yasui, with some prodding, tried to calm him down and gave him the thirty second introduction to the world of the supernatural. She later told me that she had basically said to not get rid of the sword, but give it to his son when he got his letter in five years. He was too old ‘to begin the training.’ She said she would send someone by to give him a more detailed look at what he should now expect, like seeing things he couldn’t before. The man gave his word he would wait and not show anyone the blade. We traded the scabbards, went back to the museum, and did the reverse of what we had done before, putting the “new” sword in place of the old one and repairing the lock.

The rest of our date went fine. Yasui thanked me many times for getting the sword to the rightful owner, and I kept saying it was nothing. I also apologized we wouldn’t get to as many places now, but she said it was worth it.

I found a ley line and recharged my energy, not wanting to draw from the dragon talisman unless I had to. Finally that evening I brought Yasui home and she kissed my cheek. “Because I know you haven’t chosen yet, and that would be unfair to you,” she said. “Goodnight, see you when classes start again,” and she was gone.

I did think I knew her a little better, and was glad she had insisted on this date. What would tomorrow with Elizabeth bring?

I was thinking about that as I tried to get to sleep that night. The odd

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

thing was, I could have sworn that for twenty minutes straight I could hear someone calling my name. My parents said they didn't hear anything when I went and asked them, and my powers didn't reveal anyone nearby. Finally it stopped so I just shrugged and wrote it off as some aftereffect of being close to the Heaven portal or something, and tried to get to sleep.

Disney Vacation

“Blood all around.” -- Big Al

The next morning there were no ghostly voices calling me so I worked on replacing the wards I had used the day before. That done, I still had an hour before Elizabeth was scheduled to arrive so I went downstairs and got out one of my mother’s books on wards. I had an idea in mind, but wasn’t sure if it would work.

Cache, I read to myself. Acts as a storage device for another power. Can’t store something like a holy chosen’s ability to heal because that’s innate to their soul, yadda yadda. Ah, here we are- can’t store any of the artificer’s own abilities. Crap. I knew there was a reason I rejected this earlier.

“Hey mom?” I asked, looking up from the book.

“What’s up, Dean?”

“This cache ward, have you ever used it?”

“Sure, I’ve sometimes traded some wards for other people’s power. You never know what might come in handy. You don’t need that, surely?”

“Maybe. I was thinking if I could put into it some of the things that take longer to do, magic primarily, I could save some time in the field. But there’s this restriction that I can’t put any of my own powers into it.”

“Right. You need to focus on binding the other person’s power into the ward while they activate it. You can’t really split your attention that way, and do both.”

“That’s the thing though, could I just make a spirit clone and have *him* do the magic while I put the power in?”

“I’m not familiar enough with the technique, isn’t that from Yasui’s family? I guess if you’re considered a separate person. Problem is it’s never been done before, so I can’t really advise you.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Great! I love breaking new ground. I’m going to try it!”

“Isn’t there some kind of drag, though? And you said magic was pretty tough to pull off, you couldn’t have any other power going that might distract you.”

“Humm, you’re right.” I grabbed her book on circles. “There was a circle I was thinking of learning before I made the one specifically for petitioning. The circle of concentration. If I make one of those and get into it I bet it would counteract the drag for having a clone out.”

“As long as you’re good enough at making circles, sure.”

It’s not an area I’m practiced in, but I bet I could get better. And that’s one thing I can put energy into, to improve it directly. I would only need one a night. Sadly I can’t just make one like I did with Osman, the skill I want to focus on must be worked into the circle. So I’d need a different one for every branch of magic. Long term, like years down the road, I might, but not now.

“I think I’ll learn the cache word for now, try something simple to see if it works. If I can do it I’ll learn the circle. Thanks mom.”

“Uh, sure! Any time I can give you a vague answer to a question no one has ever posed before, let me know!”

We both laughed and I got out some paper to start practicing the cache ward.

I worked for about an hour, and was feeling lucky (or perhaps cocky?) and tried one out. My mother said it was looking fine, so I made a clone and he put the flight spell into it. I picked flight because it was relatively simple and could be shown to work right away or not. I slapped it on myself and was rewarded when I could pick both feet up off the ground and fly around a bit.

“But you could do that with a regular ward,” my mother protested, watching me walking around on the ceiling.

“True, but I’ve never really felt the need to fly before and it was included in the spells Bennu gave me. Why memorize a bunch of wards when just casting the spell for that one time I might need to fly is good enough? Plus, this whole exercise is just to prove the theory. Can my clone basically make it so I can use cache without needing other people’s help? banishing demons, reading other languages, telling truth from lies- I would need a summoner, an ESPer and a seer without magic, because those are things they can innately do. Well, not banishing, I could learn to do that, just with little probability of success. With it I can do those things by myself, and cast them in advance, and have a chance they work.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“True enough.”

The doorbell rang, and I righted myself and pulled the ward off, watching it burn.

“What I really need is a ward that doesn’t burn up when you take it off. Some sort of reusable one. Oh well. See you mom!”

“Have fun, dear.”

“Hi Dean,” said Elizabeth when I opened the door. She was dressed just in a t-shirt and jeans, which was logical. We were just going to Florida, after all. “You ready to go?”

“I sure am! Unless your parents want to fight me or something?”

“What? No. My father doesn’t even know I have powers, he lives in Buffalo, and my mother is totally normal. My older brother and younger sister have been ribbing me about having a boyfriend though. They keep wanting to know where you live, and I can’t exactly tell them, now can I?”

“Sorry about that.”

“Not your fault. Oh, and I told them I don’t have a boyfriend yet, in case you were worried.”

“Wow, two siblings, huh? That must be nice.”

“Being a middle child, are you kidding? Anyway, we going or not? I can’t wait to see Disney World!”

“Sure thing. Here, slap this on.” I handed her an ignore ward and put one on myself. Then I threw down a teleport ward. “After you.”

“Why thank you, sir.” She smiled and stepped through, and I followed.

What met my eyes was astonishing. Breath taking. Totally unexpected. The crowds! Oh my goodness, the crowds-

“There’s nobody here,” said Elizabeth, looking around, confused. “What gives?”

I stared at the entrance to the park from the sheltered area I had decided to teleport into, figuring it would be clear of people and they would be focused on the entrance rather than the side. Our wards could have burned off, after all, if lots of people were around right there. There weren’t. We walked up to the entrance, which was totally fenced off, and looked inside.

The silence was eerie. Had the Disney parks ever been this quiet since they had opened? I wouldn’t have said so. Nothing moved as far as we could see.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Didn’t think this place ever closed,” remarked Elizabeth, looking around for some sign of what was going on. “And you guys fixed all the damage the gremlins did, right?”

“Yeah, we made sure of that. Took hours, but it was done. This doesn’t make any sense!”

“No signs.”

“Any signs explaining things would be miles away, in the road coming here.”

“Oh, you’re probably right. This is just to keep anyone out who walks the whole way or whatever.”

“Yeah.”

We both stared at the entrance, lost in thought.

“So now what do we do?”

“That’s obvious, we have to check this out!”

“Why? There could be a gas leak or something for all we know. It has nothing to do with us.”

“You aren’t the least bit curious?”

“A little, I guess. And I suppose we are here, we could at least look around.” She shook her head. “You sound like Sam, he was always rushing off and saying ‘we have to do something about this.’”

“Difference is, I know what the heck I’m doing.” I offered her my hand and we phased through the chains, laughing.

Man, is there a talisman I use more than that one? So worth it.

We headed inside, but neither the monorail nor boat were running, so Elizabeth called Anthy out and we rode her into the park.

“This is really creepy,” said Elizabeth, holding onto my arm and looking around as we walked down Main Street. Anthy was still out, towering over us and also alert for anything out of the ordinary.

“Nothing can see us,” I reassured her. “And Anthy is unseen, so no one normal can see her.”

“It’s not that, it’s just this place is supposed to feel alive, but instead it feels asleep. Maybe even dead. We could be the only people for miles.”

“We can leave if it’s freaking you out.”

“No, it’s okay. You’re with me, and Anthy is here. In fact, just a second.” She stopped and started chanting, reminding me I hadn’t learned any spirits in a long time. Of course, learning a ward to accomplish something a spirit could give me would be better in the long run, but spirits could not only make a person better, but give a power and answers relating to their

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

domain. Of course it took longer to summon them up, or perhaps less time, depending on how you looked at it. It took me ten minutes to make a ward but I could do it weeks in advance. She had to call it up on the spot, but that took at least a minute. Who was to say which was better?

She chanted for probably three minutes, then stopped, looking satisfied. She looked around, no doubt feeling out the impressions she was now getting through her spirit. “Anthy says nothing odd underground, and the raccoon spirit I just called out says that there’s nothing odd about the rides. They’re mostly technology though, which spirits have a little bit of trouble with. But they’re mostly dark, so the domain of the shadow applies.”

“Good to know. If it was a gas leak, Anthy would know, right? That comes from underground.”

“Right. She says many of the rides are underground too, there’s a water one?”

“The pirate one I think goes underground. I have no idea how they would fit it otherwise. Man, I wish I could show it to you, there’s this whole battle scene with a huge boat!”

“Okay, that one at the very least. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Nothing is working though, she can tell that much.”

“So weird. Come on, I want to see Fantasyland. Can you believe the last time I was here we somehow totally skipped it?”

“No!”

“Yeah! We saw Small World from a distance on our way to the Haunted Mansion where I believe my parents used the bathroom. Then we went in the opposite direction and somehow wound up forgetting that section of the park even existed.”

“Did you run out of time?”

“Must have been something like that, but I thought I looked the map over myself and decided I had seen everything I wanted to. Weird, huh?”

“Guess you’re as fallible as the rest of us!”

“Never claimed I wasn’t. Hey, there’s someone here, act casual.” I pointed to a man in a suit who had his back to us, but turned around as we got closer. He was old, probably older than my father, maybe in his 70s? He was tall, but a little hunched over, and wasn’t carrying anything.

“Act casual, that’s a good one!” We laughed and started to walk past him.

He whirled around like he could hear us and looked right at us. “Hey, you kids shouldn’t be in here, the park is closed, can’t you see that?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Uh, what?

Yasui and I looked at each other in a moment of panic. We both simultaneously checked our wards- *Yup, still intact.*

We looked around, thinking maybe there was another set of kids he was seeing and it was just a coincidence we were nearby.

“Yeah, you two. You see anyone else around here?” He suddenly seemed to catch sight of Anthony. “Huge ant!” He edged backwards, putting his back to the restaurant he was standing in front of.

“Should I have her attack?” Elizabeth whispered to me.

“Wait a second- that man’s a seer!”

He visibly relaxed. “Oh, you scared me,” he said, walking towards us. “Didn’t know they had sent anyone else recently. One of you must be a shaman but unless the other is some kind of seer prodigy, you’re getting nothing off this place. I’ve been at it for hours and don’t have a thing to show for it! Name’s Theodore, how are you?” He held his hand out.

I backed away, and Anthony put a huge leg between herself and Elizabeth.

“Hey now, what’s this?” asked Theodore.

“We find this place deserted and you’re just walking around?” asked Elizabeth. “You might have caused all this!”

“Me? This place has been shut down for days, don’t you read the papers? If it was me don’t you think the Foundation would have sent someone? Now I’ll ask you the same question- if you didn’t know this place was shut down, what are you doing here?”

If he is a seer, he’ll know if I lie.

“Would you believe a date?”

“Date?” he sputtered. “Wait a second, you were going to sneak into the park with *powers*? Naughty, naughty!” He waggled a finger at us.

“Maybe slightly,” I hedged.

“Humph. Sneaking in to Disney one day, the next, knocking over liquor stores with your huge ant.”

“We wouldn’t do that!” Elizabeth protested.

“Huh, guess you’re telling the truth. Okay, I believe you. Just a bit of harmless fun, kids being kids, all that. Sorry to disappoint you, but you’re not going to have any fun here today. Or ever again, for that matter, if we can’t figure out what went wrong.”

“What did go wrong? Oh, and I’m Dean, by the way. This is Elizabeth. You are a seer, then? I didn’t mess these wards up?”

“I’m a seer all right, and a pretty good one too. Or so I thought. Come sit down, I need a break anyway. Oh, just a second.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

He went inside while we sat at a table and returned with three bottles of juice.

“Now who’s stealing?” Elizabeth said with a grin.

“Maybe the management gave me permission to take what food I wanted in return for my services.”

“Which have so far turned up nothing?”

He gave a sigh. “Yeah. You really didn’t know, huh?”

“Nope. I’ve been pretty busy with a talisman project recently, and it’s Disney, it doesn’t close. I didn’t feel the need to check their website to see if the whole dang park was shut down!”

“It’s made a lot of kids unhappy, I can assure you of that. Here’s what we know- six days ago the park closed normally. Five days ago when it opened, nothing worked.”

“Nothing?”

“No rides, no lights, no shows, even the vehicles used by employees wouldn’t start. Power was on, electricians verified that. Just nothing worked.”

“That’s rather disturbing,” said Elizabeth.

“Quite so. Naturally we got wind of it and the Foundation sent a bunch of us to investigate. No demonic activity, no odd powers in the area, nothing. We’re all baffled.”

“Wait a second though, you seers can just pull an answer out of thin air, can’t you? Seeking, right?”

“Oh, you’re familiar with our abilities, are you? Yes, I tried that many times, asking different variants of the same question. Wanna know what I got back, time and time again?”

We both nodded our heads.

“One word. Chaos. Helpful, huh?” Elizabeth and I looked at each other, eyes wide. I felt my blood run cold, and I probably had a stunned look on my face. Elizabeth did. “What, does that actually mean something to you kids?”

“We ran into an angel some time back... a couple of months ago,” I started. “He told us that he felt chaos increasing in the world, but couldn’t say why or what it meant.”

“But it looks like we’re getting a taste of the result,” said Elizabeth, looking around.

“An angel said that? Odd he would even mention something even that nebulously. Usually they aren’t so forthcoming.”

“He was unique, in many ways. We did him a favor, and he wanted to repay us a little.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“You two did an *angel* a favor? So it isn’t all just sneaking into places, huh?”

We both gave him a dark look, and he chuckled. “Don’t mind me. So ‘chaos’ is behind this, huh? I take it he didn’t mean that organization from the old Get Smart TV show?” We gave him a blank look. “Before your time. Way, way before your time. My goodness I’m old.”

Bet I could fix that with a... focus, Dean.

“We weren’t sure what he meant. He wasn’t sure what he meant. But if you could get some petitioners here, maybe they could call some angels and get some better answers. After all, we’re right in the midst of it, right?”

“It’s better than all the ideas I’ve had!” said Theodore, throwing his hands up. “I’m about at the end of my rope here. We’ll try it.” He got out his cell phone and made a call to the Foundation, requesting all the petitioners they could lay their hands on who knew how to summon a Power.

I made a call of my own, to Osman.

“Hey Osman, you busy?”

“Dean? Not right at the moment, I guess. What’s up?”

“We’re here at Disney World, and something’s come up. We need all the petitioners we can get. Think you can lend a hand?”

“Petitioners? Won’t that be a little conspicuous?”

“Nah, there’s no one here, that’s part of the problem. Look, did you head into Fantasyland? We’re near there. Use one of the teleport wards I gave you and get here soon.”

“Okay, will do. See you.”

“Yup, see you.”

“Hey, I’ll actually be able to help, and you’ll have to sit this one out!” Elizabeth said excitedly. “How’s that for a twist?”

“Seems fine to me, you need more uses of your power that do good, from what you said.”

“Yeah, maybe it’ll take some of that stain off my soul.”

“I still don’t think what you told us about counts... Anyway, I’m not as useless as you might think, even in this situation.”

“We’ll see.”

“Okay, they’ll be here soon,” said Theodore, getting off the phone. “The call is going out. I hope this works.”

“Me too. If they can’t fix it, maybe at least collectively they can give us a better idea of what’s causing it.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Don’t get your hopes up. You know a petitioner, that’s who you called?”

“Yup. Good thing I gave all my friends a supply of teleport wards, in case they needed to get somewhere in a hurry.”

Within an hour a dozen petitioners had showed up, teleported in through whatever methods they had available. Some even stepped through ophan made gates, the ultimate in comfort and convenience of travel. If you could get past how freaky they looked, anyway. Not that I would ever say that out loud to one. I explained what I wanted them to do, though Theodore had to reassure them many times the plan was mine, not his. They kept looking at me like “what are you doing here kid?”

“Basically, I want all the Powers here you can sustain. We’re either going to turn back the chaos surrounding this place, or at least tell where it’s coming from. Sound reasonable?”

They agreed it was worth a shot.

Elizabeth offered her services as a shaman to improve people’s chances of petitioning successfully by giving them the help of the spirits. They were grateful for the help, so as she put spirits on as many as she could, I showed them the enormous circle of petitioning I had been working on the last hour. Energizing it with energy gathered from my dragon talisman, I said they should all be able to get more angels than normal, and have an easier time of it.

They thanked me, and several said they worked with artificers often, and were glad I was here. The other artificer that had brought a petitioner noted it was rather sloppy work. But he was glad I had started early so everyone wasn’t forced to wait on it.

“Yeah, talismans are more my thing,” I said. “Don’t sweat it, I’ve got the energy to burn activating it, to make up for any deficiency of design.”

Stepping into the circle they used spirit manipulation to synchronize with it, and began to pray. Theodore also got into the action, making predictions and helping correct people where they went wrong, using the power of the dragonfly that Elizabeth had given him. Elizabeth, of course, was mimicking Osman and getting as many angels there as she could.

The Powers that arrived looked around in awe, as probably nowhere on Earth had this many been gathered at any one time before. With my circle active they each got five or six, meaning about seventy showed up. It was quite a sight, as they were each twice as tall as a person, and most

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

gripped swords wreathed in holy fire. Their four wings, some white and some black, were magnificent to behold, and their gleaming armor shone with the light of the Heavenly realms.

It took a while to get them all up to speed on what we wanted them to do, but they agreed that chaos was extremely strong here. They went into an animated discussion about exactly what to do about it in the angelic tongue, leaving us mortals to simply stare at them in awe.

Still, I bet I could take one or two, right?

They were concerned with being seen, but Theodore assured them everyone normal was being kept away from the park, in case it was something supernatural that had to be dealt with. They accepted that, and told us they would ring the park and try to create a sort of barrier to break the hold of ‘chaos’ that was happening. There was some disagreement that it might come back when they stopped concentrating. They all agreed to try it, as a first step at the very least.

They took to the sky and flew low over the park, moving into position.

They spaced themselves out, becoming dots on the horizon because of how huge this place was, and I wondered if even seventy were enough.

“Sorry about this,” I said to Elizabeth. “These dates aren’t exactly working out the way I wanted.”

“Don’t sweat it- hey, wait, did something happen with Yasui, too?”

“Yeah, we found a haunted sword we had to take care of. Seriously, I just wanted a nice, normal date with a friend, but instead I get sucked back in to the supernatural world.”

“I guess you’re just a trouble magnet.”

“Maybe the universe just expects great things of you,” said Theodore, “and it’s getting you ready like a sword being forged.”

“You do have a lot of powers,” admitted Elizabeth. “So wouldn’t more be expected of you?”

“I guess I’m just a tiny cog in the All-Father’s great wheel.”

We waited tensely as the angels in the distance tried various things. I could feel spirit energy rolling around the place, and something was going on. Suddenly the teacups started moving, lights came on, and the park started to come back to life. Theodore looked around in wonder, a big smile on his face, and Elizabeth was laughing and clapping her hands.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

But will it hold?

The angels continued a moment more, then stopped, waiting to see what would happen. The park continued to show signs of life and they winged their way back to us.

“I believe it is done,” said one angel that seemed to have appointed himself the spokesman.

Spokesangel? Whatever.

“But what is done?” I asked. “What happened?”

“Chaos was strong here. We turned it back, and hopefully it will not return. If it does, call us forth again.”

“But how? What is this chaos force? Can we visit the source, stop it happening again?”

“There is no source of chaos, apart from the ones that existed before the All-Father created this universe. And if they were loose upon our plane once more it would not be this small a scale that you would see.”

“Okay, so then what is it? Can we guard against it?”

“That would be difficult. How to explain... we sense it on an intuitive level, there is no need to ever explain it between ourselves.” He thought a moment. “Think of it this way: There is a balance to the world. Some are good, some are evil. Somewhere there is drought, elsewhere there is flooding. But some events are random, or out of mortal hands. An example would be a baker, trying to make bread. This baker has baked bread their entire life, so there is no reason they should fail. However there is a chance they mix up tablespoons and teaspoons, or perhaps the yeast they selected has gone bad. Or perhaps the oven breaks or the house catches on fire. All of these things have an increasing chance not to happen, you understand?”

“Sure. Grabbing the wrong measuring cup is possible, but it’s not that possible the house catches fire at that exact instant.”

“Exactly. Chaos would cause those events with a low probability to happen more often.”

“What, more houses will start to burn down?” asked Elizabeth.

“If the world tipped towards chaos, yes. The more improbable an event, the more likely it would be to happen.”

“So forget houses burning down, the Great Wall of China could come tumbling down after someone sneezed on it.”

“Let us hope it does not come to that.”

“You got that right.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“And there’s nothing you know of that could cause this sudden increase in chaos?” I asked.

They all shook their heads. “We were tasked with maintaining order. We were not told where chaos comes from, we believed it was just part of the All-Father’s creation, to keep the world from going stagnant.”

“What do you mean, stagnant?” asked Elizabeth.

“Plain. Uninteresting. Take the opposite of chaos, order. Every time you did a thing, it would go exactly the same way. Art would suffer, science would suffer, there would be no room in the world for creativity or imagination. As much as we are loath to admit it, some chaos in the world is beneficial. That is why the balance exists.”

“Understandable. Thank you all for your help. We’ll be looking into what’s causing this, it’s a nasty trend and we’ve been warned it’s going to get worse.”

“Call upon us any time.”

The various petitioners thanked their individual agents and dismissed them, then said they needed to get back to their original tasks.

“We’ll let you know if it happens again, thanks for coming.”

And one by one they left.

“You guys are on a date?” asked Osman.

“Yeah, that’s why we came here,” I answered.

“I won’t hang around then.”

“Nice shield,” said Elizabeth, pointing to the shield I had made. Osman had brought it, which I thought was prudent given I hadn’t told him many details about what he was walking into.

“Dean made it for me. Hey, what’s the second function?”

“Oh yeah! Hand it over!” He did. “Now punch me! Not too hard though.”

“Punch you? Okay...” He punched me in the stomach, and there was a shimmer of light as he drew his fist back. “Ow!”

“See? It turns close attacks back on the attacker. Figured that would be easier than you learning a weapon.” I handed him the shield back.

“Very nice.”

“Work on blocking though, it’s not infallible. Chaos, and all that. Plus long range attacks, like arrows for instance, it wouldn’t protect against.”

He chuckled. “Got it. Have a nice date!”

He threw down a ward and stepped through it, vanishing.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Glad you kids came along,” said Theodore, now that we were alone again. “I’m going to see if the whole park is back to normal, and get in touch with management that they can open it back up tomorrow. If it stays working, anyway. If you want to help, maybe you could ride some rides, you know, poke around, make sure the insides are working too?” He winked.

“Be glad to help out!” Elizabeth said with a smile. “It’s a dirty job, but someone has to do it.”

“Good to see young people eager to help out their elders. Have fun- I mean, work hard!”

“We will.”

“And help yourself to food or drink, really. The amount they’ve lost in the past week, having the park closed? Drop in the bucket compared to some sodas. By the way, what were your names again?”

“Dean and Elizabeth,” I said.

“Just Dean?”

“Oh, Dean Chesterfield and Elizabeth Malkuwitze.”

“Fine, just fine. Glad to have you on our side, kids. See you later.”

He walked off, inspecting things as he went.

“I’ve heard of buying the park out, but this is ridiculous,” I said.

“Yeah, has there ever been a time when two people had the run of the park alone?”

“I highly doubt it. Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

And so Elizabeth and I spent the day at Disney World with no crowds, no lines and no waiting for anything. We used the opposite bathrooms, stayed on rides multiple times (luckily they were all automated, though getting on and off some of them was a bit tricky as they didn’t stop anymore) and had an amazing time. She even grabbed me up for a kiss when we said goodnight, then went laughing back into her house as I stood there stunned.

Possibly because I wasn’t really thinking of anything I heard that whisper in my head much more clearly at that moment- “You’re the one. You must come to me. There is little time. Find me. Dean. Please. You must restore balance.”

But I decided to worry about that another day.

Seeing Death

But does he stand at the patient's head or feet?

And so January passed, and I heard no more voices. Perhaps I had imagined them after all? Elizabeth and I each got a letter of thanks from the Foundation in recognition of our help with the Disney World situation, which Yasui was a bit jealous of. I explained allowing ghosts to pass on was in the job description, just part of being a person with powers. And of course no one at the Foundation actually knew about it, because we'd taken care of it without needing any assistance. I told her we could always tell the principal about it, but that might look a little like brown nosing. She said it was fine, and I told her, "Think of it this way. Isn't it more noble to do many good works in secret than to do one thing and crow it from the mountain tops?"

She went off to think about it.

Several people visited the Helping People Club with minor issues before the last week of January, and we helped where we could. I made a talisman to make a cambion immune to holy power so he could finally touch the girl he had been dating for six months. What the All-Father had been thinking when he made that particular rule I couldn't imagine. But I applauded the two getting together, most of the time holy people and cambions were found at each others throats, not holding hands and making goggly eyes at each other.

Of course, I got permission for that one. I wasn't sure if making a cambion immune to holy power, no matter the reason, was allowed. Some seers were asked to look into his future and make sure he wouldn't abuse the talisman, and he swore he had no intention of doing so. I made him say

it a few different ways, remembering the horse incident and how “easy” it was to trick seer powers with careful wording. What most annoyed me about the situation was the very fact he had to come to me for a solution at all. The fact of the matter was, the Foundation and other groups were great at big picture stuff, like a demonic attack or a graduate using their powers incorrectly. They didn’t seem that great on the everyday problems of living that cropped up because of our abilities and weaknesses.

Oh sure, he could have gone to one of the “seedier” locations that dealt in the supernatural, like Cairo. But there was no regulation, no standards and no recourse if something didn’t work out. In the first place you had to find a person that could do what you wanted to do. Then negotiate some kind of fair price for the service, and then hope they actually were skilled enough to do the job. When all he wanted to do was be near his girlfriend without his skin bubbling away, that seemed like overkill. I had believed I would follow in my mother’s footsteps, and work for the Foundation making talismans and wards officially. Or be out in the field like Yasui and Elizabeth thought. But I started to wonder, would my abilities better serve the “common man” instead? It was something to think about.

The principal also reminded me that strictly speaking, I wasn’t supposed to be using my powers without supervision. I had to laugh at that. In reality, the only thing separating me from being able to use my powers without “supervision” was a year and a couple of months, as I would be graduating next year. If I couldn’t be trusted now to do things properly, what chance did I have then? Plus, all the artificer teachers in the school exclaimed over my techniques and wanted to know my secrets! He said that was the only thing keeping him from denying the request outright.

Meanwhile, Yasui worked on her newest technique of clone step, and even Christina got in on the action, helping a young demon artist get a handle on controlling the excess energy he was always giving off. I was busy putting magic into wards, having learned the circle of concentration as I had intended. It was almost as though I was an artificer or something!

It was the last week of January when the girl with the alchemist badge walked in. She was younger than me, and had only one stripe on her arm, meaning she was a first year. I didn’t know her, and she looked around nervously.

“Can we help you?” Elizabeth asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied with an Irish accent. “It’s not me that needs the help. It’s my roommate, Ava.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Then why isn’t she here?” asked Christina. “Are her legs broken?”

“It’s not that, she just doesn’t think she can get out of it. But I don’t want her to die, so can you please help? I don’t know who else to go to.”

“Okay, back up,” I said. “I’m Dean, head of the club. Have a seat and start at the beginning.”

She introduced herself as Chloe Brennan, a first year student from Ireland. Apparently her roommate, a seer, had somehow gotten it into her head that she was going to die tomorrow, and was writing goodbye letters to her family.

“Wait,” said Christina, “she’s just sitting there, accepting this so called fate of hers?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of creepy, actually. I told her to tell someone, but she just says ‘It’s fine. No one can help me, so I may as well accept it.’” She’s given me a bunch of her jewelry and stuff, and made me promise to get the letters to various people when she’s gone. But there must be something we can do for her! I mean, what’s the point of having powers if no one can help a girl who thinks she’s going to die the next day!”

“Have the teachers refused you help? Did you even ask anyone else?” asked Yasui.

“She made me promise not to. Stupidly I agreed.”

“There’s a time and place for not keeping your word, even if it means a friendship might suffer,” said Osman. “Maybe she won’t trust you anymore, but at least she’ll be alive to not trust you.”

“I came to you guys, you aren’t bound to her promise.”

“True. Let’s go see this Ava,” I said, standing up. “Perhaps we can talk some sense into her.”

So Chloe brought us up to her dorm room, and let herself inside. It was cramped with all of us in there, but we squeezed in. There was Ava, sitting at her desk and wiping tears from her face as her roommate came back.

“I brought the Helping People Club,” she said. “Are you okay?”

Ava sniffled and tried to smile. “Have you ever written a letter you know will be your last to someone?”

“Come off it, Ava! These guys can help you, why not let them?”

She shook her head. “I told you, it’s not like that. It’s not an attack or anything, and anyone who is around me might get hurt. Better if I just go out into the woods tomorrow and never come back.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Ever hear of a self fulfilling prophesy?” asked Elizabeth.

“It is sweet that you want to help,” said Ava, looking us over, “but I’m afraid there’s nothing to be done. My future is sealed, I’ve seen it.”

“What, exactly, have you seen?” asked Osman. “How can you be so sure you’ll die tomorrow?”

“I’m a seer,” she said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I can tell.”

“You see what I mean,” asked Chloe, throwing her hands up. “Because she’s a seer she knows everything.”

I grinned. “Here’s something she won’t know. Take my hand,” I told her, holding it out. She looked at me questioningly, but obeyed. “Now, tell my future.”

The others all nodded knowingly, and Ava looked confused, but closed her eyes and concentrated. She scowled, took a deep breath, and relaxed. A moment later she scowled again. “It’s like a blank wall, or a darkness. I’ve never felt anything like it.”

“You’ll find the same phenomenon around Christina and Yasui. We’re not exactly supposed to be in this place and time, so our futures are not part of how the world was supposed to be going. I think that affords us a unique advantage, in this case.”

She looked confused. “I don’t understand.”

“And here I was thinking you were a seer that knew everything,” said Christina. “Maybe if someone like us, that seer powers can’t account for, helps you out, it might make a difference tomorrow.”

Ava took her hand back, then held it out for Christina. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“Don’t really knock yourself out,” said Elizabeth. “Unless, hey, you think you could store her in a contain ward, Dean? Carry her around tomorrow like that and let her out in two days.”

“That would keep her safe, wouldn’t it?”

“What does that have to do with knocking her out, though?” asked Chloe. “Not that I haven’t thought of slugging her a time or two today.”

“She might not want to go inside one, so we would have to force the issue,” she replied with a grin.

“Please, I’m trying to concentrate!” admonished Ava.

As she worked I looked around the room. Ava had changed out of her uniform, but the jacket was hung up on a hook outside the closet door. I looked at the flag to see where she was from, but I didn’t recognize it.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Going down it had a red stripe, then a white stripe, then a green stripe. In the middle was a sort of crown or maybe power up mushroom from a Mario game, in gold. The top part was stars and the bottom was just sort of a squiggly line.

“Tajikistan,” said Chloe, catching me looking.

I looked back over at Ava, who basically looked American. Light skin, brown hair, couldn’t tell her eye color, she had them closed again. “I would never have guessed.”

Ava sighed. “It’s the same. That is so weird. In any case, I’m not going to hide out in some ward, so you can forget it.” Chloe mimed smashing her in the head with something and then a falling body. “I’m standing right here, you know.”

“Oh, Ava, I didn’t see you there. Me not being a seer and all, just a lowly alchemist trying to help out her roommate. But if you insist on being pig headed-”

“I’m not pig headed, it’s just practical. I don’t want to cause any trouble for anyone.”

“Please,” said Elizabeth. “Trouble is our middle name. All of us. Strangest thing, that we all got the same middle name. Can’t figure that one out.”

“I can tell when you’re lying, you know that, right?”

“How will you ever date?”

“I won’t, I’m dying tomorrow, remember?”

“No, you aren’t!” said Chloe, exasperated. “Let them help you and stop being so stubborn. Let us tell a teacher at least!”

“I’ve told you, it’s pointless. I’m sorry she told you about this, but it’s my problem. You shouldn’t get involved.”

“Hey, no one is dying around here on my watch,” I said. “Come on, we’re already here, and I want to hear all about your homeland. Did you have a lot of friends there? How big is it? What’s life there like? Is it really different from here? Are your parents supernatural too or was it all a big shock? See, I’m just getting started. But you can only answer me in two days. So that means you have to survive tomorrow. Now- what’s going to kill you? We can work around it, I’m sure.”

Ava seemed to struggle with herself a moment, then finally sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t know?” exploded Chloe. “Then how do-”

I held up a hand. “But you’re still convinced that somehow you won’t make it through the day alive?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“That’s right. I know I’m going to die, but not how.”

“Just you?” asked Christina.

“What do you mean?”

“If it’s some kind of attack and others are going to die, we should start preparing.”

She gave a weak smile. “I think with all the seers around here it would be almost impossible the school could be attacked.”

“I don’t know, you’d be surprised,” said Yasui, no doubt remembering all her wanderings with the Time Frame, looking at the past.

“What about your roommate?” said Yasui. “Is she going to be fine tomorrow? It stands to reason if you’re killed, she would be too. I mean you must stick close together at least part of the day.”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to ask,” said Ava, going over to her. “Okay, apparently she’ll do better than she expects on her next alchemy exam.”

“That’s two weeks away,” said Chloe brightly. “Excellent. Wait, do I still have to study? I mean, you’ve seen it, right?”

“I think you have to study even harder if you want that prediction to come true,” put in Osman.

“Right,” said Ava. “It’s just a possible future, but the one most likely to happen right now, at this moment.”

“I guess I’ll do some extra studying. But wait, maybe my bringing these guys here has changed your future! Try it again, see what you get!”

“They won’t count, no matter what they do. I can’t see the future relating to them. So their actions can’t be predicted by my power.”

“Oh.”

“I guess I would rather not have these letters delivered, but what exactly can you do?” Ava asked us.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

I handed over several things, including an acceleration ward, an ignore ward, and my armor undershirt.

“Don’t worry, I washed it after the last time I wore it. It’s clean,” I told her. “Wear it tomorrow and say ‘armor’ at the first sign of trouble. It’ll take most any attack, and give you a chance to get the wards out.”

“We aren’t just going to leave it at that though, are we?” asked Elizabeth.

“No, we are not,” I said. “Yasui and I will have clones nearby, Yasui for when she needs to do girl only things. She’s in just as much danger in the shower as in class, after all.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Clones?” asked Chloe.

“Spirit clones. It’s a true martial artist technique. Hey, what a fantastic idea!” I snapped my fingers. “Yasui, let me put that skill into a cache ward. We can make some decoys of Ava here, if something does attack her it might get the wrong one!”

“Good thinking,” said Yasui. “We can do that tonight.”

“Yeah, I just need some paper and a pen. Yasui and Christina, you can sleep here tonight, unless you girls don’t mind a guy sleeping in your room?” I asked hopefully. They both gave me a dirty look. “I thought not. Gee, what a way to repay a guy. Anyway, we’ll all eat lunch with you, walk you to classes, and you can hang with us after school too. Nothing is going to get by us, let me tell you.”

And the next day, reality tried to kill Ava.

I arrived early in the morning, slipping around seers that could penetrate my ignore ward and moving about the girl’s dorms. Having reached her room I took off the ward when no one was nearby and knocked. The door cracked open and I was let inside. The room was a mess. It looked like a beam had cracked above her bed and fell, tearing through the ceiling and almost spearing her. In the corner of the room, opposite the smashed in window, sat a large, round, rock. Also the overhead lamp had fallen, and there seemed to be scorch marks on the carpet, probably from a small fire.

“Quiet night?” I asked.

“Reasonably,” answered Yasui.

“Almost boring,” said Christina.

“Where’s Chloe?”

“She decided to sleep elsewhere after the beam fell,” said Ava. “I don’t blame her. I tried to get Christina and Yasui to leave, but they insisted on staying.”

“And a good thing we did, given what happened after that,” said Yasui.

“I am grateful, I just hope your efforts don’t get one of you killed.”

“You just let us worry about that!” put in Christina.

“Come on, let’s go shower and change, then Dean here can make some clones of you and we can see if that will help.” Yasui led her out of the room.

I took a step froward. “Great, let’s go!”

They all looked at me and backed out of the room, as if daring me to move. Yasui didn’t take an eye off me as she slowly closed the door, backing out through the opening.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Gee, tough crowd.

When they got back we went to breakfast, then stopped into a yet unused classroom. I had Ava roll down her legging and stuck the ward with spirit clone onto her leg. Suddenly there were three other Avas in the room, all with a ward on. They looked at each other and rolled their legging back up, covering the ward. They reached over and adjusted all their ties, then looked over at me.

“This is weird,” they all said.

“Gha, one at a time!”

“Sorry,” said one. “I can’t feel them, but I do feel something dragging me down.”

“Can’t be helped. Rely on us to protect you, you’ll probably drag a bit from the number of times you’ve been split. Am I talking to the original?”

She nodded.

“Okay, you’re with me. I’ll make a clone to escort one of you, a Christina clone will go with one, and a Yasui clone will go with the last one. Shoot, I’ll have to make two, one to go to my classes and one to go with you.” I pointed to the clone.

“I can’t clone myself!” protested Christina.

“Just ask Osman or Elizabeth to help out,” said Yasui.

I held up another ward. “You can with this. I wouldn’t want you missing class either.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.”

“Isn’t it though? I thought it was. Where shall I stick it?”

“I’ll tell you were to stick it,” she muttered, but rolled her legging down as well.

“As far as asking Osman or Elizabeth, they have futures and so they would have been accounted for when Ava did her looking into the future to see if she would die today. So I’m afraid it’s up to us.”

“That puts a unique perspective on that power,” said one Ava. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, but I really am taking into account millions of variables when I try to see the future. No wonder it’s usually so foggy and unspecific.”

“Where are we all going?” asked another Ava clone. “It would be dangerous to be together, right?”

“We’re headed to Porta, down by the airfield should be safe enough, though if rocks are sailing through the air maybe nowhere is. Christina, I

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

was thinking about the forest for you, find some cover and stay there. Yasui can take a teleport ward and go to one of our field trip locations. Don't tell us where, just go, in case something is listening to us right now. The final copy of you and my clone will go to your classes. We'll have to explain why I'm there for your classes, but we'll be telling the truth if they ask any seers."

"Oh sure, send the person with the bow to where there's a bunch of trees."

"I'm sending the person with the bow and the ability to shoot anywhere she can see into the trees," I stressed. "If something tries sneaking up on you, thinking it has cover, it's in for a nasty surprise."

"Ah, well, fine. As long as you thought it through."

"But what about class?" protested Ava. "I can't skip, and sending my clone means I'm not going to learn anything today! Not," she hastened to add, "that saving my life isn't important, and I would gladly trade one day of classes for it, but still. Someone might somehow notice it's not really me."

"That's the beauty of it, this clone is really you. And so is this one. And that one. When your clones go away, you'll learn what they learned. It'll be like you were with me, in class, with Christina, and miles away with Yasui, all today, all at the same time. Neat, huh?"

She seemed impressed. "Yeah. I can see where that would come in handy."

"Believe me, it has. Shall we get started?"

"Lead the way."

I made two clones and we all headed in different directions. She hadn't gone halfway down to the outside before a light fixture fell on her. I tackled her out of the way as glass shattered where she had been standing.

"Actually," I said, lying on top of her, "maybe you better activate that armor now, and we'll just make sure it's up once an hour or so."

"Good idea," she replied, looking up at me.

Finally outside, we started walking in the direction of the "airfield," a strip of grass that allowed the planes to land on the island.

"Wait a second," I said. "Why didn't you see that light coming?"

"I don't know. My power is supposed to warn me of danger, but I didn't get a twinge that time. Or when the other stuff happened last night. If those friends of yours hadn't been there..."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Right. Plain old premonition can do that much, ESPers like Katrina can see a little way into the future. seers can just do it better.

“I’m glad they were, then.”

“Yeah, me too.”

We hung around, sort of bored, as the middle of an airstrip is great for seeing things coming, not so great on the entertainment front. It was a bit cold, but I had put my withstand weather spell into some wards, and we both put one on. She was delighted when her shivering abruptly stopped and she felt warm again.

We talked about classes and how she was getting along, being away from home. A little while after lunch (which I had packed in my talisman bag) she suddenly jerked her head and her eyes went wide.

“What happened?”

“One of me just died,” she reported. “The Yasui one. We were heading down some steps and I just fell. I think I broke my neck.” She rubbed it unconsciously. “That made the clone disappear and you’re right, I have ‘her’ memories now. That was scary, suddenly remembering you fell down some stairs and died!”

“Sorry you had to go through that. Still, better her than you, right?”

She grinned. “At least I disappeared, and the Yasui clone probably did too, after that. People will just think they saw a ghost or something.”

A while later, something was drifting towards us, and I put myself between it and Ava. It turned out to be Katrina, using her projection and levitating a piece of paper.

“You two okay out here?”

“A bit bored, but safe,” I replied. “How are things going inside?”

“Weird,” said Kat, floating the paper over to me. “The teachers noticed, and they’ve been trying to figure out what’s going on.”

“It’s that bad?” asked Ava.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, this is from Elizabeth. She says Ava’s in some of her classes because you’re both first years. Things have been trying to kill you all day, and I’ve been fighting them off. Go me! She does write that this exact thing went on right after she got powers, and it wound up killing all the people that got holy powers except Matt. Apparently Matt’s luck was too much for it and whatever was causing these bizarre, random things to happen, sort of gave up with him. So obviously this is freaking her out. Teachers don’t

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

know what's causing it, etc. etc." I looked up. "Thanks for bringing this, Kat, but Osman could have just walked out here himself. It's not like he's going to go nuts and try killing her with his bare hands, right?"

Katrina looked away.

"What? What happened?" asked Ava.

"Apparently some first year inheritor's sword sprang out of the sheath and turned on the owner. At that point he turned into some weird dragon looking thing and had to be purified by holy chosen. Wrecked a whole classroom before they got him under control again. He had an unusual fascination with trying to kill Ava, so Osman didn't want to take any chances."

"It's that serious?" I asked.

"Apparently whatever is causing this is getting frustrated or something. I'm worried about you two, nothing has happened here?"

"No. You know, I'm wondering about this now." I untied my pouch from my belt and hefted it. "Katrina knows I put a talisman power on this bag so it'll come back to me if I ever lose it. Or if it's forcibly taken from me. Some sort of potential builds up and if I dropped it into the ocean, eventually a wave would carry it back to me. I was thinking these events were separate, but maybe they're something like my ownership of this bag. But in reverse, you see? That's why these things are happening over there, where there's a lot of potential things that could happen to you. Out here, not so much."

"Which means there's no relief valve," said Ava, "to sort of extend the metaphor."

"Wait, are you saying it'll build until it gets really bad?" asked Katrina.

"That's what Dean seems to be saying."

"Do you want to go someplace else? We could head into town, but I'm not sure about facing a bunch of little things instead of one big thing."

"Speaking of one big thing," cautioned Kat, "is it just me, or is it getting windier out here? I can't feel it, but the grass seems to be swaying."

We looked down and she was right.

"Waterspout!" shouted Ava, pointing out across the ocean. We both looked and she was right, water was being pulled out of the ocean into a twister of liquid, and it was heading right for us.

"Run!" I shouted, tapping into my dragon for extra energy. "Katrina, stay with her. Your TK won't be as good like that, but you're all she's got at the moment."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Right!”

“Wait, you can’t fight the whole ocean!”

I turned and raised my hand towards it. “Don’t be so sure. Go!”

Oh yeah, I look cool right now, no question.

“Come on, let the man work,” said Katrina, floating backwards and beckoning Ava to follow. “We need to get further inland, in case he... you better not die, Dean Chesterfield!”

Don’t plan on it, but this could be tricky.

I sensed Ava pulling away, and I gathered myself to attack the oncoming storm.

I activated all my talismans but the acceleration one, wishing I had my armor but knowing I could phase in an instant, if it came to that. *Good thing my main attack is a wind attack. Hopefully I can just blow it apart.*

I didn’t use acceleration at the moment because it was too far away, but coming closer. I wanted to wait until the very last second, then drop into “fast time” and start trying to whittle it away. To do otherwise would just make my standing here dreading the thing seem longer.

Come on, closer!

I had never really seen the attack used at full power except the one time after I made it for Osman. Even attacking the palace of the Tengu I held back, not wanting it to go out of control. Though to be fair, we were actually pretty far away when Osman triggered that first blast, in case it went wild. Now I figured I might as well see what it could do. I knew it could reach pretty far, but not exactly how far.

Oh yeah, I could do a small burst at maximum range and see where it ends up.

I did, and the swirling water was nearing my range. Water droplets and wind began to lash at me, but with the spell/ward going I hardly noticed. I stayed focused on the whirling tower of water before me. When I judged it in range, I unleashed an attack, maximum range, maximum radius. The two elemental forces sheared together, but the tower seemed undamaged as it rotated and sucked up more water. The place I had torn water away from seemed undamaged.

Maybe if I get it more in the center, rather than at the edge?

I was about to activate my acceleration talisman when an arrow streaked out of nowhere and detonated, tearing a sheet of water from the wind.

I looked, but there was no one to be found on the ground. *Is she shooting from the classroom?*

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Six beams of Earth energy slammed into the twister, and I looked up, seeing Elizabeth riding Anthy and shouting something to me. I couldn't hear her, she was too far away and the wind was too loud. She pointed at it, and another arrow blew part of it away.

I guess she wants us to attack it at the same time?

I nodded and send another wind blast into the thing, while Anthy and Elizabeth shot Earth energy into it and arrows came out of nowhere, detonating when they got close.

Come on!

The tower of water inched closer, but sections of it were being blasted off and went flying. This did nothing for the wind, however, and as quickly as we shattered it out of the vortex, more water was sucked up.

But maybe once it's on land we can strip it away and only have the wind to deal with.

I wasn't sure if we should just wait to attack until then, but I did notice it was getting lighter out, and I felt more positive about the whole experience. Almost peaceful, in a way. As it got brighter and brighter I saw a ball of light shoot past me from the direction of the school, and a magical circle appeared under the force of nature baring down on us.

We didn't let up, but I saw it get weaker and finally the remaining water splashed back into the ocean, the winds calmed to the point they could no longer hold the water up.

"Are you all right?" a melodic voice asked me, as the orb drifted closer.

"Heavenly Virtue, I thank you for your timely assistance," I answered. "I am fine, thanks to you."

"And because of your own efforts, I'm sure. Still, thank the petitioner Osman who saw the storm and sent me out to assist you."

"I will. He's a good friend of mine."

"That is well. If you are unhurt I will report back to him that the crisis is over."

I nodded and the Virtue drifted back towards the school. Elizabeth and Anthy landed.

"You know, Dean," she said with a grin, "when all Hell is breaking loose you're supposed to be riding the eye of the storm, not shooting at it from a distance."

"I'll keep that in mind for next time."

No Answers

*“What is the airspeed velocity of
an unladen swallow?” --Bridge-keeper*

“Please explain to me what’s going on around here!” said principal DeLefeu, slamming his hand down on the desk. “There’s clones all over the place, one Dean and Ava are soaked, one was hiding out in the forest, and this place seems to be ready to fall apart at the seams. Lights falling, wood cracking, storms out of nowhere, and there’s Dean Chesterfield, in the middle of it all. Christina was shooting arrows that vanished in the middle of class, Elizabeth jumps out a window, catches her flying ant thing in mid-air and flies off, and Osman starts petitioning something with no warning. Did I miss anything?”

“How did you all know to do that?” I asked them.

“Katrina told us you were in trouble,” Osman answered.

What I took to be an illusion appeared on the principal’s desk, kicking her feet and giving me a little wave. She winked.

I gave her a tight smile, but then realized she probably couldn’t see it. I would be at the edge of Osman’s vision, nothing more.

“Please, sir,” said Ava, “I asked for his help, he’s not to blame.”

“That’s a lie,” said Mandara Darjiling, a seer teacher, who was standing behind the desk.

She sighed. “Okay, fine. My roommate asked on my behalf.”

“That’s also a lie.”

“Stop saying that!” shouted Ava. “Okay, she went behind my back and told the Helping People Club and despite my wanting everyone to stay out of it they insisted and wanted to try saving my life. Are you happy now?”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Mandara considered for a moment. “Yes.”

“That’s a lie,” said Ava. “You aren’t really that happy at all. So. There. Humph.” She crossed her arms over her chest, and the two stared at each other.

“Ladies, please,” pleaded Lucian. “Not now.”

As he said “now” the floor suddenly gave away where Ava was standing and she plunged straight down with a squeak. I tried to grab her but Yasui also lunged for her and we smacked into each other with a dull thunk. Mandara was horrified, putting her hands over her mouth. Our eyes were wide as everyone crowded around the jagged hole in the floor, unable to do anything to stop Ava’s descent to the ground floor below.

A hideous crunching, splattering, and cry of anguish reached our ears and was cut off, and Lucian stared in horror over the top of his desk. The Ava still in the room screamed and clutched her legs.

Every eye turned to her as she staggered and almost fell into the hole herself, but we grabbed her in time.

“Thank God that was a clone,” she said quietly. “But now I know the sensation of having my neck and both legs broken. This has just been a wonderful day of new experiences for me.”

“Are you all right?” Lucian demanded.

“It was just a surprise, seeing myself fall and then hearing that and then knowing what it felt like. The pain didn’t transfer, thankfully.”

“I should hope not, that technique would be worthless otherwise. Now, can someone tell me what’s going on?”

“I can tell you what I believe is going on,” I said. “And I think Elizabeth has some experience in this area as well. But exactly what’s going on? No, probably not.”

“All right, what do you think is going on?”

“Soon after Elizabeth and her friends at Bay Trail got powers, all the holy people were killed in very mysterious circumstances,” I began. “Almost as if the very world was out to get them. This much she explained to us.” He nodded. “I think we’re seeing something similar in action here. For whatever reason, she’s been targeted, possibly at random, and the world wants to kill her. Probably related to this ‘chaos’ that angels keep talking about, and what killed the Disney parks.”

“And you didn’t come to someone about this, why?”

Ava looked down abashedly.

“If I may,” I said, “from what I’ve learned from spending some time with her and hearing stories of her early life, I think she doesn’t want to be

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

a burden on anyone. That included this situation, where she thought it was a certainty she was going to die today.”

“And not that I don’t appreciate your efforts to see her safely alive tomorrow, why didn’t *you* come tell someone? You’ve been better at that after you made those weapons.”

“Simple. Her power takes the rest of you into account. Not so with the three of us. I firmly believed we were the only ones that could keep her safe. To our credit, we did try to do this in the least disruptive way possible. I attended classes, we all did, as normal. I didn’t think it would go this far, who would!?”

He seemed to grudgingly agree to this. “I see. Why do you think this is related to the Disney thing?”

“The angels we met said chaos would make things with a low probability happen more often. What are the chances every ride at Disney stops working at the same time? Remote, right? What about all holy people dying in the week after they get powers? About the same, I would say. Now this- what are the actual chances the wood floor of your office would crack right underneath Ava, making her fall to her death? So remote as to be almost zero. Especially after everything else that’s happened to her today.”

“There was only one survivor for that high school incident, wasn’t there?”

“One petitioner survivor, yes. The ‘attack’ lasted a day and when it didn’t work, whatever tried to kill Matt didn’t come back.”

“Matt, yes, that was his name. Let’s hope this ‘attack’ doesn’t last more than a day as well.”

“Could we, like, have this discussion elsewhere?” asked Ava, glancing at the hole in the floor. “That’s sort of freaking me out. Perhaps somewhere lower down?”

“Oh, yes!” Lucian popped up out of his chair. “I’m sorry, I should have said that right off. Let’s... carefully go downstairs and try to avoid anything that could fall on us. I’ll get an alchemist to fix that hole later.”

We went down to the ground floor and then further down to one of the practice rooms which were underground. Not too far underground, of course.

“We can easily get out if it starts collapsing,” said Lucian, looking around. Ava stiffened. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

At that point there wasn't much else to discuss. I told principal DeLefeu what the angels had said and reminded him of the dreamer that came to us to say we would be needed for some crisis in the future. He said he would look into sources of "chaos" in the world but if some Primordial One was hanging around, there wouldn't be much anyone could do about it.

"A what?" asked Ava.

"You'll learn about them in demonology next year. They're the things that existed in the time before our universe. Creatures of chaos that retreated to a higher plane when the All-Father coalesced and brought order. Our entire planet would be like a marble to a Lord, but one of their servants might hang around for some bizarre reason."

"Oh."

"Can they be found?" asked Christina.

"They warp reality around them, so it would be difficult. Plus I've never really seen one," admitted Mandara. "So I really don't know what I would look for."

"Wait, I hope that dreamer guy doesn't expect the five of us to fight something like that!" I said.

"No, he must have done what he did for a reason," replied Lucian. "We just have to figure that reason out. For now, stay here unless you feel a tremor or something. You have some teleport wards?" he asked me. I nodded. "Fine. Get off the island if it gets too bad. Keep moving, don't let whatever this force is catch up. At least, I hope that's the right advice."

"Staying outside in one place let it build up, maybe that's a better plan," I said, thoughtfully.

"I'd almost suggest an airplane, if I wasn't scared the engines would just die and make it crash," said Ava.

"Hey, we could go to purgatory," I exclaimed. "Nothing around there to fall on you, or weather to go crazy. Now why didn't I think of that earlier?"

Lucian rubbed his chin. "That's an option. Didn't you tell me the reality bending powers of the dreamers didn't reach into the other planes? People knew you but you didn't know them?"

"I wouldn't call a demon and an angel people, but yes."

"If you don't mind doing it, try going there and see what happens. I know opening that gate isn't the easiest for you, but if you kept it open we could stay in contact."

"Yeah, that's not too much of a strain. I'll send a clone every hour to report."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“Fine. Back to class, all of you. Even you, Dean clone.”

“What about me?” asked the last Ava clone.

“I’ll excuse you from classes today. Much as I like the idea of having a backup of you, the main you should be safe and you’re just a trouble magnet.”

“I understand. Thanks for all this. Sorry for, you know, all the trouble.” She tore the ward off, and both disappeared.

With everyone gone I got out my book, figuring I had the time. I would save my wards for a more dire situation. Ava watched with interest as I used magic to tear a hole in reality and create a portal to purgatory.

“Why not go up instead of down?” asked Ava, stepping through. “This place is a dump!”

“We’re going to be here for hours,” I said, looking around for any sign of danger. “That long a stay next to Heaven can be problematic.”

“Oh, I guess you’re right. Want to play I spy? I spy with my little eye something starting with R.”

“Rock.”

“Okay, your go.”

In the end, Ava was safe the rest of the night and once midnight came around again, we felt she was okay to return.

“Thanks for everything,” she told me as we made our way back to the dorms. “I owe you three my life. Yesterday I didn’t see any future for myself, now I have all sorts of possibilities.”

“Thank the dreamer that brought me here,” I replied, “he made me what I am. I’m just doing what I can with what I have.”

“You’re doing a great job. And thanks for keeping me company, you’re a nice guy. I’d take you to dinner or something to thank you, but I saw Yasui and Elizabeth looking at you *that way* so I figure this will have to do as repayment.”

She grabbed me and planted a kiss on my lips. With her arms around me I felt she was warm and soft and all too soon she broke it off.

“One other thing,” she whispered to me. “I didn’t wear a bra at all today, so I think you know what that means.” She spun away laughing. “I’ll get it washed and back to you tomorrow! See ya!” She sprinted towards the girl’s dorms, shouting about being alive.

The armor talisman... it’s been against... all day...

I unsteadily made my way to my own dorm room and collapsed into bed. It had been a trying day, but none of it had stunned me like she had just then.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Maybe having a girlfriend wouldn't be that bad, if I got to do more of that...

It's a curious phenomenon, one I expect most are familiar with: if you go looking for something, you are sure to find more of it than if you were not looking. The next day I sat down at my computer and started going over news reports from various countries. I used keywords like "surprising" and "unexpected" and "bizarre" and didn't come up empty handed. If you knew what to look for, a pattern of sorts began to emerge.

I hadn't realized it before now for a few reasons. The first being I hadn't really looked. More importantly I hadn't thought to look because why would I? Demonic or other supernatural goings on in the world were the responsibility of the Foundation or other groups like it. The Watchers for instance. Both organizations employed seers to root out demons and such, and in that regard they functioned well enough. But this was something different.

This was a report of a window washer falling when his platform car cables snapped all at the same time. He lived. It was a report of a fly buzzing through a peanut butter factory and then climbing into the mouth of a severely allergic individual half a mile away while they slept. They died. Innocent reports of entire shipments of iPads failing from a "defect at the factory" to water being discovered in towns with drought conditions.

The incidents were never close enough together to get people curious. Weird things happened all the time, right? No, it was at opposite ends of a country, then it moved on, but you could chart a course of something moving by the odd things that were left in its wake. The problem was—what was moving?

If it was a thing, what was its purpose? Was it just sampling the world's locations and the chaos it brought was merely a side effect? Or was this force or creature actively doing these things, waiting for its power to grow stronger? Had it been here on the island, trying to kill Ava or was the chaos also random, and I was seeing a pattern where there was none?

Furthermore, how was I supposed to stop something like this? If it was a creature, fine, maybe it could be fought but what if it was innocent? What if this was some manifestation of a power the Foundation had never seen, like dreamer power that had now faded from the world? For all I knew, an innocent business man or woman could be going about their daily work, traveling the world, and leaving this sort of thing behind as a byproduct. I didn't know of any talisman that could stop the randomness of the universe.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

I cataloged the events by year, starting two or three years ago. It was difficult to determine the exact point simply random events became directed random events, and to sift out things that probably had supernatural explanations that normal people weren't aware of. I shook my head as I read things over. It was rather ironic, if more people had known about the way the world actually worked, maybe more questions would have been raised, sooner.

I thought about the man I had met, Martin DeVille, who I had heard was a very, very old Breath Stealer. Rumor was he had seen the rise and fall of the Roman empire, so a man more tied to tradition you probably would never find. Was it his policies that now dictated this global conspiracy to keep people with powers safely hidden away? Was that the right thing to do?

Give people a challenge, and they will rise to it. Look at Yasui, I haven't heard her complain about how she got short changed in the powers department lately. She used to be more mopey, thinking she couldn't really contribute anything, but now she's learning techniques and expanding the number of things she can do to benefit the group.

Wasn't it the same with humanity at large? When there was a catastrophe of some kind, wasn't the human response to draw together and help each other out? Would knowledge of powers really spark riots? Wouldn't ending all those religious holy wars by showing people exactly how things worked be worth the risk? A single spirit hunter could make war obsolete, because they could probably smash an army by themselves and never be seen once.

Of course, now that I thought about it, that was also a dangerous road to go down, creating a fear of unseen warriors that could terrorize the planet and never be stopped. Were we really still so afraid of the dark and each other, that witch hunts could happen all over again? I mean, yes, witches were bad news, at least the ones that came from demonic contracts, but any real witch was more than a match for an angry mob or two.

When will humanity be ready? Ever? Is Mr DeVille patiently waiting for that day, or has he despaired of it ever coming? Will we have to meet visitors from other planets before we can unify and be ready for the truth? And what happens when the truth, that's been kept from people for thousands of years, does get out? Resentment, for a start. I can hear people now; "We all could have had powers? With careful breeding, artificers making things, wards, none of us needed to be powerless?" I think the longer it's hidden, the worse it'll be. I printed out the notes I had made to

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

pass on to the principal. *This is all I can do, for now. Maybe he'll have us use the Time Frame to check all these locations out, or send seers at the very least. I was out there in that storm, and I didn't see anyone directing it. So that probably won't even help.*

How do you fight something as nebulous as chaos?

Order, if you come, came the reply, so quietly I swore I imagined it.

Better tell him about that voice I'm hearing, too. Someone I could name hearing a giant snake didn't, and look where that got him. I don't want to make the same mistake.

Theft

"I thought to piss off a Warlock you had to burn down his village, or kill his familiar, something. No. All you have to do is steal five dollars from him." --Patton Oswald

"You're hearing voices?" asked principal DeLefeu, when I brought him the notes I had made.

"A voice, not voices plural. But yes, I think I heard it just a little while ago."

"And it said something about order?"

"Right. I was wondering how to fight something like chaos, and it's almost like the voice answered me."

"I guess it stands to reason you use order to fight chaos, but what good does that actually do us? We can't forge order into a weapon."

"I just thought I would tell you."

"What about the other times?"

"Something calling my name. Saying I needed to go somewhere, I think?"

"We better check and make sure you haven't somehow picked up a sundered spirit or something. I'll have Mandara look you over, if that's okay with you."

"Fine."

So I waited while she was called to the office, and after she heard what Mr DeLefeu wanted, she looked me over.

"I have good news, you're not possessed or anything like that. Nor have you any demonic taint in your soul. That means you haven't spontaneously acquired a sundered spirit."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“That is good news,” I replied. “Wait, can that happen?”

“Just the once that I know about,” replied Lucian.

“The bad news is,” Mandara went on, “that doesn’t get us any closer to knowing where this voice of yours is coming from. With your permission I’ll meld with you and see if I can’t spot anything from the inside.”

“I suppose I can’t well refuse, can I?” I said glumly. *I guess I don’t really have any secrets I don’t want known anyway, if I think about it.* “Go ahead.”

She took my hands and closed her eyes, and I felt her intrude into my thoughts. I let her in as best I could.

Try and think back to when you heard this voice, she directed me.

Very well.

I thought back to the first time, lying in bed and hearing something calling my name. Then after Disney with Elizabeth, and hearing that I must ‘restore balance’ which made sense. Then just a few minutes ago, when it spoke about order.

Mandara came out of it.

“You’re not imagining it, that much is certain,” she said with confidence. “What it means though I will have to spend some time thinking about.”

“Thanks, Mandara,” said Lucian. “See what you can come up with. Meanwhile I’ll forward this on,” he tapped the sheets I had printed, “and see if it turns up anything. Good work, by the way.”

“Thanks, just doing what I can. Let me know.”

“It’s becoming more and more clear this group of yours was literally created to deal with whatever this chaos thing turns out to be.” He echoed my sentiment back at me. “I can’t very well refuse, can I?”

I shrugged. “Not if you want it dealt with, I guess?”

“I’ll see you later.”

February passed without further incident, but again we helped out with some minor issues people were having. I spent half of Valentine’s day with Yasui, half with Elizabeth, and both ribbed me for not choosing yet. I explained one date does not a decision make, and really, this chaos thing (which I needed a snappier name for) took precedence anyway. Both of them had good points, but it wasn’t like I was choosing a car, I had to let it happen naturally.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

It was the middle of March when the announcement came over the PA system in the dorms, advising us classes were canceled and everyone was to gather in the auditorium.

I braced for the worst.

“I have some disturbing news,” said Lucian from the podium, after everyone had found a seat. “I wanted to share it with you before you started reading wild theories on the internet, which you will.

“Last night, two things happened. The first, and the event of greater scale was in Syria. For those that don’t know, it is an area of great instability and conflict between several major groups, including the ISIL, Kurdish forces and the actual Syrian government. Of course, much of this is directed behind the scenes by demons, but not all of it. At roughly two AM, an area of darkness appeared and began moving across the country. When it passed, all weapons and ammunition of every kind were gone. Other areas of darkness appeared and scooped up tanks, planes, jeeps, and other delivery methods for explosive devices. Rocket launchers and such.”

Everyone was whispering and looking around, but Lucian called for quiet.

“The second, and the event of greater importance, and the one you won’t hear about on the news is the apparent theft of a nuclear device from a US silo in a classified location. Again, darkness descended and when it was gone, the missile was not to be found. We have rumors of an entire battleship going missing, but we don’t have confirmation of that one way or the other yet. Obviously I am telling you this in the strictest confidence, and you are in no way to relate it to those not part of the supernatural world.”

He paused a few moments to let that sink in. People were looking worried, and rightly so.

“Given the nature of this... abduction... and the potential cause for harm, we are going on a semi-permanent lockdown as of this moment. If demons have been emboldened and decided to gather humans weapons, rather than rely upon their own powers, we must be ready for them.” He clicked on the projector, and a picture of the island showed on the screen. “As you can see, this is the radius of the blast that would result from the detonation of the stolen missile.” The school, forests and nearby areas showed in red, while Porta showed in yellow, which meant it wouldn’t be blown away completely, but would suffer radioactive fallout.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“What does this lockdown mean? You will all be briefed on evacuation procedures and given a ward to teleport yourself off the island. You will be given a photograph of a location to teleport to, where we can take a headcount and give you further instructions. Memorize it, your life may depend upon it. Should a nuclear launch be detected an alarm will sound through the school and Porta. We are now employing a seer both to guard against that possibility, and others sweeping the sky in case they render themselves immune to seer power. Residents of Porta will also be given the same ward and information of where to go in the event of an attack.” He paused, looking us over. “Questions?”

Several hands went up, and Lucian pointed.

The boy got up and started shouting something, but one of the ES-Per teachers, Hanna Darrington, stepped up and tapped her head. He fell silent, and she relayed the question.

“The question is about your possessions. Yes, that is a concern. We can provide boxes and reduced shipping rates so you can move the bulk of your possessions elsewhere. We’ll have one of our planes land and take cargo rather than passengers so we can get it all. It will go into the normal mail stream as we don’t have the facilities to distribute them afterwards.” Hanna “listened” to him again. “Ah, yes, those with families in Porta. Ugh, I don’t know, we’ll work something out.”

Cargo containers and contain wards, I thought. We could easily have a shipment of them brought in, fill them up with everything from people’s houses, and then just zip them into the ward. Easy. Lucian was pointing to someone else.

A girl stood up and said nothing. Hanna spoke to Lucian.

“Yes, the school building was long ago rendered practically invincible so there’s no danger of the building itself being destroyed. Radiation will be another story. But no, don’t worry, the things that are sealed here and the ley lines are staying right where they are.”

Another girl was called upon.

“How did this happen in the first place? Good question. It seems demons are getting... smarter might not be the right word. Crafty? Tricky? I’m sure most of you heard what happened at Disney when those gremlins were summoned- they used wards to stick around longer. It seems demons are starting to think ahead more, and combine their various abilities rather than standing on their own.” He sighed. “This is actually of grave concern to us, as it was our unity and their separation that was our biggest advantage. If that advantage goes away we’re going to need new strategies for

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

dealing with them. We know their weaknesses, from long studying them. If they no longer have those weaknesses, our job becomes that much harder. To more directly answer the question, we can't see what they're planning in the Demon World. The attacks happened too fast for us to respond to. Wards were used to deflect seer abilities. So there were a lot of reasons no one saw this coming."

Not to mention how improbable it was that demons would try something on this large a scale. We better start thinking about other very improbable events and try to come up with some counters for them.

A boy stood up.

"How much time do we have? Hard to say. Unless they really have stolen that battleship they have no way to carry or launch the missile. They'll have to figure out how to rig some kind of launcher as the ship doesn't have one. Plus breaking the code to actually activate the warhead, programming the course to hit us... weeks at the very least, unless they've had that all planned out as well and are fitting it as we speak." He grinned. "But that's rather—"

He stopped and his face fell. He whispered something to Gordon Drumlie, who was also on stage, and he nodded and left out the side exit.

Improbable. Yes. Now you see the problem.

"Next question."

A boy stood up.

Lucian laughed. "My boy, we're already at war with them. What did you think this school was all about? This is just another salvo in a fight that's gone on for thousands of years, and won't be won until the All-Father decides we or He has had enough and calls for Judgement Day. Yes, them getting guns and tanks and such is a concern, but their powers and abilities were already a concern, so this changes little. Should they target us with the missile we will survive, regroup, and plan our counterattack as we always have. Next question." He looked around, but no one else stood up. "Very well. I expect you all to pull together through this incident. It's going to be difficult, I know, living under a threat of this magnitude. We've faced adversity before, and survived. We'll survive this. Gather any nonessential belongings, send them home, and be watchful. Head to your dorms now, teachers, prefects and others will be giving you the specifics of what comes next. I will warn you, finals will not be canceled unless this island is a smoking crater, so do keep up with your studies."

There were general boos and grumbling, and I heard more than one person remark they were rooting for the missile.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Lucian seemed to struggle with himself a moment. “Lastly, could the... Legion of Order come and see me at their earliest convenience? You know who you are. That is all.”

I tried to suppress my laughter, what escaped from my lips could reasonably be called “chortling.”

“Legion of Order? That’s us, right?” Osman asked me.

“Yeah, I think that’s us.”

“Let’s not keep the man waiting,” said Yasui.

Twenty minutes later Osman and I were walking with the principal towards a car, parked some ways away from the school. Osman carried a telescope case.

“Do you really think this will work?” he asked.

“It’s worth a try,” replied Lucian. “You see better than most, and with the telescope your range should be even greater. Dean here can cross us over into purgatory, something we don’t find easy to do.”

“Odd, that,” I remarked. “Summoners can easily, well, not that easily but you get the point, open a portal to the Demon World.”

“And if I wanted to, I could learn to open a portal to the Heavenly Realms,” said Osman. “Though why I would want to visit such a dangerous place is beyond me.”

“It is odd that it seems only a rare cambion has the ability to step only part way. In any case, I want to know if that place you guys checked out before is where they’re keeping all the equipment they stole. It would give us a huge advantage to know what they’re doing with it at the moment.”

“I’m certainly willing to try.”

We drove as far as we could, towards where we remembered about where we were in the Demon World when we saw that weird training ground, then walked the rest of the way to the coast. I opened a doorway to purgatory, and the principal set up the telescope. I then created a clone and he slapped a ward that contained the spell of coterminous vision onto Osman.

“What’s this for?” he asked. “I can already see the Demon World from here.”

It was true, we could see that we were standing on something, but it was tenuous, because in this spot in the demon world there was nothing holding us up. It was an odd scene.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“This will let you see past purgatory easier,” I explained. “At the range you’re talking about, every little bit will help.”

“Reasonable. But why don’t we just go out in a boat, head in that direction, open the portal, and look through? That would be way easier than trying to do it this way.”

“Maybe,” said Lucian, “but then we might have to contend with rockets, bullets, and demons possibly immune to whatever we had at the moment to throw at them. Still want to try it?”

“I suppose not. Very well.”

He bent to the telescope and started moving it in tiny increments, this way and that.

We both patiently waited, gateway back to the island shimmering behind us, and Osman looked and looked for the place. Finally he got excited as he said he was close.

“Yes, yes, this is it! I see something. Oh, that’s very interesting, isn’t it? Strange.”

“What? What do you see?” asked Lucian, leaning forward.

“I can show you,” said Osman, straightening up. “Just close your eyes.”

“What, do your eyes give you some sort of seer technique? Or can Dean give you a spirit or something? Fine, whatever, just show me!” He closed his eyes.

Spirits? Man, I’ve neglected learning any spirits in favor of wards. I should look back into that, see if there’s any that might be useful.

“Oh, nothing so complicated,” said Osman. “That’s what I see when I look through the telescope. You’re looking at it right now.”

Lucian made a face. “Darkness. You see darkness?” He opened his eyes and Osman nodded.

“A large area of darkness, large enough to cover the entire field down there.”

“Great. Let me think...”

“What about some kind of darksight ability?” I asked.

“From what I understand that requires you to be in the dark. Being here would mess it up because it’s daytime.”

“So couldn’t we just come back at night? Sure, it would be nice to know immediately, but sundown isn’t that far away.”

“I suppose you’re right. Come on, leave the telescope, I doubt anything will bother it while we’re gone, and it should stay pointed at the place. We’ll head back.”

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

We returned to the dorms and started packing everything away into the boxes that had been provided. I put my stuff into my pouch, but Osman addressed several to himself. He set them out in the hallway to be picked up and put on the cart that was going by every so often, collecting them.

The halls themselves were nearly silent, where usually there was always a hint of music, laughter, or muted voices from behind closed doors. Not so now. The joy seemed to be gone, and everyone moved as though a little hope had been destroyed.

Maybe it had.

That night when we went back we got another rude surprise. They had converted the big ball of darkness to a big ball of blinding light!

“Okay, this is ridiculous,” remarked Osman, looking through again. “You were right, they really are getting a lot more devious.”

“I guess we’ll have to send someone down there to take a look,” Lucian sighed.

“Say, they didn’t get any mines, did they?”

“Mines? Probably, why? Oh.”

“I suppose if whoever we sent was warded up to the hilt. Invisible, invulnerable, flying-”

“No, because there could be alarm spells around the place, or spells to force flying things to the ground where they get blown up. For all we know they’re busy making the mines into wards or putting trap spells on them, triggered to go off as someone gets nearby. Then they get a double explosion, one supernatural, one not. Plus that would let them know someone was down there. If they really are thinking things through now, gathering different kinds of power in one place to use against us, we’re going to have to be exceedingly careful in how we proceed.

“In any case that’ll be a matter for the Foundation to attend to. I don’t want your group going anywhere near that place, understand?”

“Oh, don’t worry. I don’t intend to.”

“Good. Let’s get back, I still have a lot of work to do tonight.”

Kaboom

*“I am become death, the destroyer
of worlds.” --Robert Oppenheimer*

The end of March and the whole of April were tense months. Grades started slipping, field trips were canceled, and tempers ran high. Both between students and students, and students and teachers, more shouting than ever before could be heard about homework, exams, anything. The teachers tried to be civil to each other, at least within earshot of the students, but the threat hanging over our heads was wearing.

Without the little things to decorate the rooms like posters and pictures of their parents, even older kids like myself started getting homesick and just wishing for the school year to be over. I predicted the lowest grades on record for finals this year. Many times I overheard people grumbling to just get it over with already, and wondered if that wasn't also part of the plan. Demoralize us, make us high strung and less able to react when the inevitable finally did come. Many reported problems sleeping, and the nurse was dealing with more injuries than normal, too.

It didn't help that reports started coming in of high level Foundation members being shot, at least one a week. The scenario was always the same- Member is out in public, maybe going to their "real" job that puts them in a position of authority in the non-supernatural world, and without warning they're on the ground with a bullet in their heads. No sniper is ever found, and the caliber of the bullets don't match with long range weapons. Invulnerable wards didn't even seem to help, they were gunned down just the same, meaning artificers, demonic or otherwise, were probably making the bullets able to bypass that.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

It fit, with how slowly they were taking members out. Making each bullet properly would take some time, though you would think whatever demons set this all up would have more than one artificer working for them. And they weren't taking any chances, as it turned out. The third member that was killed, an ESPer of some regard, was only hit with a glancing blow. She died almost instantly anyway, and when we arrived on the scene I felt a lingering magic on the bullet. Some kind of high grade Pluto spell is all I could tell.

We did figure out how they were doing it though. Yasui brought the Time Frame along and Osman looked through it, trying to figure out where the sniper had been. He needn't have bothered. Looking in the direction the bullet came from we saw a small tear open from purgatory to Earth and darkness beyond it. That night we went back and stepped over to purgatory ourselves, armed with darksight. Of course they were invisible, too. When the trigger was pulled there was a shimmer, but nothing appeared.

"Spell trigger," said Iris, having been petitioned and questioned. "It's a spell that can bind another spell into a person and trigger on a specific event. Like if the caster is about to die, it releases a powerful healing spell. Or in this case, if the caster shoots a gun they get teleported away so they aren't seen as they become visible."

"Or a simpler explanation," said Lucian, "that there was a second gunman, one holding on to a teleport, and just released it as the trigger was squeezed."

A week before the next disaster I asked how penetrating the Demon World training camp was going.

"Oh, don't even get me started," said Lucian. "Do you know it's not just darkness down there? No, it's both an illusionary darkness, and a real darkness. Not to mention silence spells, that cursed wall of light that's behind the wall of darkness, and we think there are some circles there too, to keep humans out! You know our circle of protection? They've made one that works against humans. We got someone in there and they had to pull out immediately because their skin started boiling off. Can you believe that?"

"That's terrible! They must have worked on that area for years."

"That or they worked very, very fast. I don't get it though. I didn't think the Demon World would be touched by this chaos stuff that's happening here."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

I mean, demons figuring out they could use wards, okay, fine. People tripping and falling who shouldn't, reasonable. But whole armies disappearing? Nukes stolen? Magic and organization on a massive scale? This isn't chaos, it's deliberate, like someone is making these things happen. The number of wizards and such needed to create that area we can't get into must be staggering!"

"But not unreasonable, if you consider every devil is an accomplished spell caster. You think some Demon Lord noticed what was happening here and decided to capitalize on it? I suppose they could have noticed earlier than we did, or something, but I can't figure out how."

"That's bugging me too. I really hope whatever it is that is causing chaos here isn't also working there part of the time, organizing all this."

"Who could unite different factions of demons though? That would take some smooth talking."

"No question. Hey, you haven't heard that voice lately, have you?" I shook my head. "Too bad. We need to find out what that was all about, too. If there's nothing else?"

"Let me know what else my group can help with."

"You've been a big help already, keeping people calm and on track. Your knowing a lot of the students here has really come in handy. Plus your reputation with that club of yours. Honestly, I didn't think anything would come of it, but I'm glad you started it."

"Thanks."

Then, the third week of April, an even bigger tragedy struck. It happened at night, at least for us, about 3:00 AM. Soon everyone was up and buzzing about it, word having spread though the dorms person to person. We were all up, blearily watching the news as emergency crews tried to find survivors from the wreckage.

"As you can see behind me," said the reporter on the news, "the Eiffel tower has suddenly collapsed. Rescue crews are moving in, and the death toll will no doubt be in the hundreds. As far as eyewitness accounts go, there was no sign of an explosion."

Behind her was basically a pile of rubble, that used to be a famous monument and from what I had heard in class, a talisman as well.

This can't be good. The whole thing just fell apart?

The picture cut to a french woman, speaking quickly and not bothering to wipe tears from her eyes.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

“It was horrible,” said the voice over. “I was not paying it any attention on my way to National Library where I work. Suddenly there was a tremendous noise and the tower simply collapsed on itself. People were running and screaming, I will never forget that sound.”

The reporter was back.

“Four separate terrorist groups have already claimed responsibility for the disaster, but the sheer scope of this tragedy makes any one group’s involvement seem tenuous at best. Experts at this stage say taking the tower down in this manner, all at once, would be nearly impossible.”

I turned away, not needing to hear any more. The special report continued behind me, where those in the news room started talking about the “bad luck year” and what other bizarre events had happened since the year started.

So even they are starting to notice. Not that they could miss this one. The trouble is it’s only going to get worse from here.

Then I heard the voice again.

You are right. Have you begun to seek me? You do not seem closer. Dean, there is little time, and we must be together if I am to help you. Chaos will recede, now that this has been done, but only for a time. The frequency will grow until it cannot be stopped. Please, come to me!

Where are you? What are you? I desperately tried to send to whatever was talking to me.

I have told you, I am Order. You do not know where I am? I... I cannot describe where I am to you. You must come to me. If you do not, if the world has forgotten me, then all is lost. Chaos will rule. It surges again, I must recede from your mind lest I be discovered. Hurry!

It went silent.

That explained a few things. For one, why it couldn’t contact me all the time. Doing so must leave whatever or whoever it was open to attack or discovery by “chaos.” For another, it was old if it was claiming we had forgotten about it. And it couldn’t describe where it was, meaning it was either sightless, captive, or in a place that couldn’t be described.

I scribbled a quick note to the principal so I didn’t forget what it had said, and what I gleaned from that, and went back to bed. There was nothing I could do for those people now.

The next day, the tower incident was the only thing that was talked about, and there was an announcement that extra Foundation forces were on their way there to investigate. Spirit hunter society had apparently also

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

responded, and said they would provide protection in case the invisible, hidden sniper returned.

Yes, they could probably open gateways to purgatory too. So that makes sense.

A few days later it was reported they found no evidence of supernatural activity in the area and that it seemed as though every nut, bolt, screw and weld in the entire tower decided to come apart at the exact same instant, leaving gravity to do the rest.

The French government was dragging its feet on starting restoration efforts, because they couldn't determine the cause and were not going to proceed until they had answers. Those in the know pushed hard for starting immediately because of ramifications to the entire area. Normal people thought they might be talking about tourism, which was a huge concern given how many people visited the tower in a year, but the reality was different.

The entire thing was there to actually dampen the ley lines in the area, as apparently some major ones intersected there, and people were already complaining about headaches, electronic stuff acting weird, and seeing odd visions. With that talisman gone the lines were growing back to full strength and would soon cause some major havoc to the city. They could also begin moving, as the force of the intersection of that amount of spiritual power smashed into itself. Personnel had been brought in to try and stem the tide, but they were hampered by the attention on the area now because they needed to work in secret.

None of this helped matters around the school, as a tense situation got even worse. People started really freaking out, and by people I meant both students and the residents of Porta. They hadn't forgotten that freak storm that had almost made landfall, and would have, had magic not been employed to stop it. They were all wondering what disaster was going to be next, and what the Foundation was going to do about it.

Naturally the Foundation didn't have any answers.

While our club saw a surge in people coming to talk things over, most other club attendance was down. I gave what reassurances I could, though I didn't start talking about the fact our group was set up by some insane dreamer to ultimately solve this problem. Anyone who hadn't been through what we had would think me insane. The only reason we hadn't all dismissed it was that shared dream, and the fact that the dreamer's prediction

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

of disaster to come seemed real. But with no leads except a voice in my head sometimes it wasn't much to go on. seers were trying but apparently not getting anything, the concepts of "order" and "chaos" being too nebulous to really ask about.

Finals week was closing in, and May began. Some started to relax, but others got more tense, feeling if something was going to happen, it would be soon.

It did.

The school was quiet. The first of the final exams was being held, when suddenly everyone jumped as alarm bells started ringing throughout the island.

"Evacuate," said a voice over the loudspeaker. "We have thirty seconds to impact. Evacuate or die!"

There was pandemonium, and people fumbled for wards or rushed for bags at the back at the classroom, not realizing they could use another's ward to get through. I grabbed a handful from my pouch and threw them down.

"Here!" I shouted, trying to get everyone's attention. "Use these! Hurry!"

My eyes met Yasui's, caught in the press of bodies at the back of the room.

She yelled something, one hand outstretched to me. I gestured for her to hurry up, but she shook her head and shouted "GO!"

"Fifteen seconds to impact," came over the PA. "No further warnings. May the All-Father protect you."

"Come on!" I said, hauling someone through. The others saw and ran for the ward circles on the floor. I saw Yasui, much faster than a normal person normally, barrel into someone slower in front of her and both fell in a tangle of limbs.

"Yasui!" I cried, reaching out, but she was too far. "Get up, get up!"

How much time was left?

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Epilogue

The place was a dump. How could it be otherwise, when every penny had been spent finding the stone?

Stone. Is that what I am?

The stone was stone no longer, but more like a seed. Still clutched in the hand of the man that first touched it, tendrils of its substance had made their way into the man's arms, like perverse roots. Only half the original diameter of the sphere was left, the rest sunken out of sight. On the other hand a ring encircled his pinky, the only finger it would fit on. The ring that made his followers love him, worship him. How he was grateful to that artificer for creating it for him. The man gave a jerk, a random laugh, and then was quiet again.

He often came here to rest, after a big job.

I'm still too human. One day I will not need to rest.

"No, I'm still too human. Leave me alone!"

Isn't this what you wanted? Power? The ability to make your mark on the world?

"Not like this. Why do we have to go to that awful place? The things there make my flesh crawl."

They are needed to further chaos. I thought you understood. Look-look at our power in so short a time.

The man's hand jerked to the remote of his TV, and turned on the news.

"And just weeks after the apparent terrorist bombing of the Eiffel tower, another tragedy has befallen the world. But this one of a very different sort. Countries around the world registered the detonation of a nuclear device on this strange island that, until this event, was not to be found on any map."

A grainy picture of Demongate Island was shown next to the anchor.

"Satellite imagery shows the remains of a town on the north west edge of the island, now deserted as radiation and fallout render it uninhabitable. But where did they go? Where did this nuclear device come from? What was the point of destroying this tiny island? Why has no map or chart ever shown it? Mysteries abound in the world, and this one seems to be the biggest of them all."

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

The TV was turned off.

The tower was inspired, I admit. I'm so glad you told me about it. But the island- that is the real victory."

"Why did that have to happen? They did nothing to you."

The one that can stop me is there. Was there. Now gone. Maybe dead. Order would use the one, like I use you. Fight me to a standstill, take me from you, imprison me again. I can't have that.

"All this for one person?"

This and more, if needed. My army will now hunt down the rest of them, any who have a chance of resisting me. Imagine, thousands of years flailing about but under my leadership they flourish. Don't worry, one day they will have their turn. They too have order about them, and must be shown the way of things.

Rest now. Soon I will have everything I need from you, then nothing will ever worry you again. Only I will remain.

"And what happens to me?"

You? Why should I concern myself? Perhaps I will allow you a small sliver of consciousness, just so you can see the great works you do. But perhaps not. What should it matter? There are billions more of you.

"I don't want to die."

That's a bit rich, considering what you were like before I joined with you. Fat. Lazy. Not eating right, drinking. If you valued life so much, why not take better care of it? In any case, you would have died one way or the other. I'm giving you a chance to attain immortality through me. I will take your body and use it as my own, and it will never decay. I would think you would be more grateful.

"The one will stop you."

Perhaps. If the one finds Order, which I doubt. It took your entire life, tracking you little by little, to figure out how to tell you where I was. Order doesn't have that time. All Order has is desperation. You should not count on him. You should just give me what I want.

"Never. You'll have to take it an inch at a time."

Believe me, I will. Rest now.

The probability of the lights flicking themselves off at that exact instant was minuscule, so it happened, and Chaos forced the man to sleep.

It burrowed a little further into his arm.

Soon.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Note From The Author

As in previous books, every attempt has been made to follow the official Paragon Demongate High setting rules exactly. The author, (that's me) finally had the version 2 rulebook to work with as this book was begun. (Go buy it. Now. Now. Now! :-)

That is both the explanation and meta-explanation for the changes you and Dean saw in this world. In universe, the removal of dreamer power from the world caused changes, as the Mad Dreamer was no longer there to maintain them. Back in our universe, certain people, events, and rules were finalized and in order to be as accurate as possible, they had to change. Plus who knows what messing about with time did, when Elizabeth was saved from that curse...

Certain things, like the rule that "substances alchemists work with cannot be turned into talismans" I continued to ignore. Because reasons. Any other cases where rules have seemingly been broken may be construed as the author saying "I would prefer it work this way." To go along with that, those things that "require narrator approval" like what powers can be put into what talismans should not be thought of as reflective of what talismans you could make in your own Demongate High campaigns, should you have them. The main book tells us if we don't like a rule for our campaign, then change it, so I feel justified in making some tweaks where the creator of the system and myself don't see eye to eye.

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!

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Glossary

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.

Ant Spirit—Elizabeth's guiding spirit, reflecting her hard work attitude and going along with the group to achieve a goal.

Aqua Vitae—An alchemical creation which provides the equivalent of a full days food and drink with just a sip.

Bakeneko—A terrestrial creature that looks like a cat with two tails. Can turn into any person they have seen, which duplicates both their powers and their memories.

Barrier—A method of generating force to keep things away from you.

Breath Stealer—Responsible for many tales of Vampires, the Breath Stealer lives by taking the soul energy of others into themselves. This grants them longevity as long as they continue feeding, but is unpleasant and damaging to the victim. Demons, having no physical form apart from their spiritual essence have this damage magnified.

Cambion—Those with some demon ancestry. Can look like demons and have a weakness for holy power.

Cohesion—A small barrier accelerated at high speed with telekinesis. Can harm Invulnerable creatures.

Compulsion—An ESPer technique to control the actions of another through a type of instant hypnosis.

Spirit Step—Using spirit energy rather than physical motion to move about. Tiring, but allows instantaneous movement from one place to another. Short range.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Creation—A spell to create a single object, made of a single material.

Dragon Talisman—An energy gathering talisman Dean and Albert made early on. Holds a tremendous amount of energy he can pull out at will.

Dreamer—Extinct power, at one time could draw upon a fraction of the All-Father's power, while sleeping, and change reality to an extent. Dean cut this power off, see Book 2.

Energy Weapon—A spirit energist technique of creating a solid weapon from their spirit energy that they can use to fight with.

ESP—An ESPer technique of sensing information beyond what others can do.

ESPer—A person that uses willpower to change the world around them. Levitating objects is the cornerstone of many of their powers.

Healing Acceleration—An ESPer technique to speed healing times dramatically.

Imtate—A ward created to make a person look like another person.

Incantations—The method of creating “magic” used by spirit hunters through manipulation of energy, chants, and gestures.

Insubstantial—Ghostlike, being able to observe the material world but not touch it.

Katrina—Osman's twin sister, who took the place of his Guardian Angel before he was born. Osman is technically a chimera, one person with two distinct sets of DNA.

Koma-inu—An angelic creature, resembling a lion and a dog.

“Long Way” - Dean refers to demons that are summoned and killed reforming in purgatory via a very painful and drawn out process that stitches their energy back together.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Memory Alteration—An ESPer technique to make people believe they remember events differently than they originally would.

Passing—A spirit hunter technique which allows ghosts to pass on before they have completed whatever task anchors them to Earth.

Petition—To call an angel down from Heaven.

Petitioner—One that calls upon the Heavens for aid indirectly, by opening a gateway between Earth and Heaven to allow angels to pass into our world. Usually accompanied by a guardian angel that keeps them from harm.

Pocket Dimension—A space to put items that can be reached into so that you don't have to carry a lot of stuff around, but still have access to it.

Premonition—An ESPer technique of telling the future.

Progenitor—One of the original humans, who could learn any skill, unlike modern humans that learn, at most, a handful of them.

Projection—A piece of a shaman's soul, solidified with spirit energy and having powers the shaman does not. Fights on the shaman's behalf.

Ritual Dance—Can assist shamans in calling spirits.

Ryoko and Ayeka—Two characters from the Tenchi Muyo anime series that are in love with the main character, Tenchi, and bicker all the time.

Seer—An ESPer specializing in non-physical mental effects such as seeing invisible things, the future, or separating the truth from lies.

Shaman—One that utilizes spirit energy to call upon nature spirits. Can also project their soul into a fighting force in order to defend themselves.

Shape-Shifting—The ability to change one's shape at will.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Soul Appraising—A soul wielder technique which can give certain insights into the soul one is touching.

Soul Wielder—One that can remove and manipulate the soul of others. Can turn them into weapons, defensive items, even heal or damage them directly. Now being taught at the school.

Spirit Clone—The true martial artist technique of creating a copy of oneself with spirit energy. Creates spiritual “drag” on a person, thus each clone they support makes the entire group less effective overall.

Spirit Energist—One that uses spirit energy in the most direct way, turning it into energy beams or shields.

Spirit Energy—The life energy that surrounds the planet and exists within all creatures. Used to power supernatural effects and mundane efforts to, for example, lift heavy objects.

Spirit Focus—Some individuals need an object to help them use their powers. This object is called a spirit focus.

Spirit Grades—Those born with this ability can increase their energy totals through concentration and long study. A temporary measure at best, can be damaging to the environment.

Spirit Hunter—One that gains power by forcing their soul out of their body, rendering it comatose, and animating a body made of pure spirit energy. They appear with a weapon and traditional dress for their culture, and can call upon greater power by undergoing internal, spiritual journeys with their spirit weapon. Two levels of power are possible through study, transforming the weapon into successfully more powerful forms.

Spirit Manipulation—Allows a person to draw upon more of their energy than their bodies would normally allow.

Spirit Overflow—Some with large amounts of spirit energy have trouble controlling it. This condition is called spirit overflow. Can be managed with attention to spirit manipulation but this slightly reduces the amount of energy a person can spend.

HELPING PEOPLE CLUB

Spirit Sense—A technique to feel out the energy of an area, person, or thing.

Sundered Spirit—A rare and poorly studied phenomenon where the demon a person would become if they went to the demon world in death is active in life. Can take over their actions and eventually take them over completely.

Sunlight Knife—An alchemical creation, finished by Albert before he graduated. Pure sunlight in the form of a knife.

Surveil—A ward, made in pairs, that acts as a security camera.

Talisman—An object, created by an artificer, that carries supernatural power inside it. Can be always active or activated with energy.

Telekinesis—Moving objects though only the power of the mind.

Time Frame—A talisman made by Dean, shows the past.

Unseen—While not invisible, somehow unable to be perceived by those without some supernatural power in their souls.