

Learning The World

Demongate High Book 2.5

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For My Grandmother

*Who always told me I could do anything
I put my mind to*

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1

The Mystery Begins

Land sakes child, you gave me a fright.

The blue green world hung beneath me, like so many before and soon more to come, I was sure. My armor, a gift or so I had come to regard it, protected me from the vacuum and other hazards of space without a thought. My visor, the only break in the liquid, organic like silver that covered my physical form, glowed red as I gazed down to see if this world was worthy of my attentions or not. All along the land, colors shifted and changed as the beings living there went about their daily lives. I studied each one without emotion, seeing what colors dominated what areas. As far away as they were, the colors of their sins stood out with clarity before my eyes. I did not know how I had been given my powers, or by whom, but my mission was clear: Find worlds with intelligent beings and watch them. If they were worthy of my help, assist them with as little disruption to their way of life as possible. When they were already on the right track, leave them to their fate. But were they a danger to other species outside their own planet? Eliminate them.

I had the power to do either of the three.

This world was curious. Many evils in this world flashed before my eyes and were cataloged: red for murder, blue for sadness, yellow for... the list was not important. However, the colors did not predominate, and watching for many revolutions of the planet from my vantage point I saw that many of those colors were dealt with in what this planet called justice. I saw these beings seem to help each other, and harm each other, in equal measure, but it seemed they were trying. Their methods were not perfect, but neither were they the worst I had seen. Some areas seemed more restrained than others,

while some were less so... an oddness, to be sure, most places I visited had equal distributions of color.

But something even more puzzling caught my attention, a large region of orange- too large to be even a few beings, it was more like hundreds. *Can some natural disaster be taking place in that area?* I thought to myself. I willed myself there and looked around, phased out of their reality slightly so as not to interfere in what was happening even inadvertently. As I swept my gaze left and right, I saw the beings running this way and that, obviously terrified, but of what I could not say. I did not register any seismic activity in the area, nor any concentrations of the primitive weapons they seemed to utilize. I concluded they were not under attack, at least not by any means I could see. So what was causing this panic?

I unconsciously shifted my form to more resemble theirs, my armor flowing smoothly around my body as I did so. It wasn't necessary, of course, as I had yet to make the decision to assist them or not, so none would ever see me. I did like to experience the form of the beings I was studying, hence the change. I had found that form mattered a great deal, sometimes giving insights as to why a culture or species did what it-

"What was that?" I asked, startled, as some part of the structure I was currently in suddenly smashed apart and began falling upon the beings below.

"Unknown," my armor answered me. That gave me a seconds pause, which I felt foolish about. Of course my armor could answer me verbally. I was just so used to accessing it mentally, thinking about it as a part of myself, that I hadn't used that functionality in some time. Apparently speaking aloud had given it the idea I wished to converse with it in that fashion, and so it did. I didn't mind, either way.

"Begin a deep scan," I commanded it, looking up at the area and stepping to the "left," out of time synchronization with these beings. Reading flashed across my visor but none to explain what was happening.

"No explosive devices detected. No standard energy signatures detected. Anomalous readings in area," my armor droned.

"What readings?" I demanded. I should say they were anomalous if no energy caused that explosion. But something did- there it was! Anyway, "standard" energy readings? I didn't like the sound of that.

"Inconsistent energy signatures."

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“Direct me.”

The armor directed me to a certain spot and informed me the reading emanated from directly in front of me, but nothing was there.

“Are-” No, of course my armor was sure. If it said something was there, then something was. It didn’t seem like this planet had developed any sort of stealth or phase technology, but that didn’t mean two hidden aliens weren’t going at it right here. *If that is so*, I thought, *I will remove them to a more suitable battleground without them even knowing*. It was in my power to exactly duplicate these surroundings elsewhere, minus the beings who were in danger here, and relay the fighters there. When the battle was over, bring the victor back here none the wiser and make sure they left the planet. If they didn’t leave, or the wrong sort of being was the victor, I could take action against them to make sure they didn’t harm the native population. I could do that. I had done it before.

The problem was, a deep scan of my surroundings should have uncovered any cloaked beings right away, but it apparently hadn’t. It was feasible a species had developed a technology my armor couldn’t penetrate, but I hadn’t encountered any thus far in my travels.

“Increase my temporal synchronization by 10%,” I commanded my armor, which powered certain parts of itself to comply with my order. The action began to crawl again as I reached 10% synchronization, allowing me to closely study everything in detail as it happened.

Looking around, I saw people apparently being flung about by some unseen force, and then, of all things, an energy beam appeared out of nowhere! I mentally slowed my sync to 0% again, as that was faster than verbally commanding it, and strode over to the origin point for the blast. Now here was something obviously not native to this planet! Also, it gave me a point to focus on, something tangible I could probe; something was generating this bolt of energy, and I meant to find out what.

“Deep scan of this point right here,” I said, pointing to the area just before the beam began. “Deploy additional scanning units if necessary.”

Pieces of my armor flowed off and reformed into spheres, hovering over and through the area as they scanned. The armor around my body thinned to compensate, but I paid that no mind as I read the scrolling results on my visor’s display.

“Permission for probe units to phase into normal space-time?”

I considered. With all the commotion going on here it was unlikely they would be noticed for the duration of time needed to complete a scan.

“Granted. Increase to 100% synchronization for the duration.”

The probes positioned themselves.

“Affirmative.”

The action resumed as I stepped “right,” back into the normal flow of time, and the probes became solid with respect to the matter in this area. They took a burst reading and I stepped “left” again as they rejoined my armor and melted back into place.

“Vibrational disturbance detected at target point.”

I consulted my database for exactly what that meant, and came up blank. That set me back, there was very little technology that wasn’t in my database. Another “gift” of my creators.

“Can you... elaborate?” I asked hesitantly.

A diagram covered part of my display, and I studied it interestedly. “All matter and energy vibrate unceasingly and synchronously in this universe,” it began. That I was familiar with. There was a species that had developed a weapon based on that principal that could literally shake anything apart by creating a field of counter vibration around an object. “Postulate matter present at target point vibrates unsynchronously with surroundings.”

I stared. Obviously that was not shaking them or the surroundings apart, unless that was the cause of the- no, I looked over at where the beam terminated and decided it was a battle taking place right here. A battle none of the beings here could see, or even begin to understand, because whatever was fighting couldn’t be seen by them.

“Some sort of cloaking technology?” I asked.

“Unknown. More data must be gathered.”

I considered. *This planet may be interesting to watch after all*, I thought. “Can you shift my perceptions to allow me to see them?”

“Affirmative. Please stand by.”

As my armor worked on that request I stared at the space where the beam was coming from. I hadn’t felt this excited in a long time! What would be revealed? I could hardly-

“That’s it?” I grumbled as a figure came into view. “That must be some kind of further deception.”

“You are now viewing reality as it exists,” my armor said a bit petulantly, if such a thing was possible.

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“But-” I couldn’t even finish my thought. Before me was what looked like any other inhabitant of this planet. In one hand was held some kind of primitive bladed weapon and in the other...

“That can’t be right!” I exclaimed. “Where’s the weapon it’s using to generate that energy beam?”

My armor hesitated, something I was most definitely not accustomed to. “You are now viewing-”

“Don’t give me that! Look at- scan the area again now and compensate for the vibrational anomaly.”

A moment passed.

“Further scans show a difference between perceived reality and expected reality. Only the bladed weapon is held.”

“That would mean-” The implications of this were staggering. Not only was this individual not seen by the others around it, apparently it could generate energy beams from out of nothing. *Wait a second, there must be some other, simpler, explanation.*

“Scan for cybernetic implants or synthetic tissues in the target individual.”

“No implants detected. No synthetic tissues detected.” It paused. “Target is biological?”

“That sounded like a question!”

“Affirmative. Discrepancies with surrounding biological life detected.”

“What discrepancies?”

Again the hesitation. “That is unknown at this time.”

“So you know something is different, but you can’t say exactly what?”

“Affirmative.”

“Well!” This was turning out to be much more interesting than- I turned to see what the figure was aiming at. “Huh.”

“Please restate?”

“What is that creature? Don’t answer, I know you don’t know yet.”

I walked closer. It was very different in appearance to the beings around it, but not overly so. It walked upright, and was about the same size as the others, but it didn’t wear coverings like they did. Also, wings protruded from the creature’s back, and horns sprouted from its head. The legs were also odd. “Is that a tail?”

“Affirmative.”

The creature was obviously wounded, but the blood, if that’s what it was, seemed to be burning up in the air rather than dripping down like a normal fluid. It was in the process of dodging the energy blast, which I found rather impressive, until I realized it was still there, hanging in midair.

“Estimate speed of energy blast.”

My armor rattled off a number that was much slower than it should have been, further confusing me.

“Possible explanation.”

“Go ahead.”

“Being is actually throwing this energy rather than discharging it.”

I considered. It was as good a theory as any. I looked back and forth between the two figures, trying to figure out exactly what they were. Obviously no technology was keeping this creature vibrationally separate from the rest of the universe, unless it was implanted somehow. My armor said it detected no such technology but did declare some sort of energy was present around it. I asked where the energy was coming from, but my armor said no supply beam was detected, so the creature must be generating it, itself.

As I studied it, I didn't take long to see the attacked creature was obviously a predator of some kind. The claws protruding from the thing's fingers were proof enough of that.

“Is it possible,” I asked my armor, “that creatures on this world evolved the ability to alter their vibrational makeup? And to combat them, others evolved the ability to-” No, it was too farfetched. A biological organism could create a shock of electricity or the like, but this beam rivaled a directed energy weapon! Could a living being really create such a thing on a whim?

“I'd like to see what else this being can do,” I said, walking back over to the being generating the beam. “Bring my temporal synchronization back to 10%.”

The world slowly began moving again, and the creature finished dodging the attack and jumped backwards, moving its hands in a weird pattern. Looking back at the attacker I noticed it doing the same thing as the creature bounced backwards down the space that was opening around this area. Looking down, I noticed an odd ring of light surrounding the creature, and mentally ordered a scan of it.

“Energy matches that of field present around the creature,” it answered.

Let's see what further surprise you have for me, I thought. An instant later, the creature seemed to vanish!

“Track it!” I shouted, looking around. “It could be employing another layer of deception!”

“Tracking impossible. Only one vibrational anomaly in the area detected.”

“It's just gone?” I asked, shocked again. “Did it teleport, or get teleported away?”

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“No known teleportation energy recorded during specified event.”

I looked back at the other figure, perhaps it would give me a clue of what happened, as presumably it would have dealt with this sort of thing before.

Its facial expression changed, though if it was happy or not I couldn't say, and it stopped waving a hand around and slowly looked about. Perhaps the creature *had* escaped somehow. Then the being started waving a hand again, and I was sure it was vocalizing as well. I took the biggest shock of all: a hole appeared in the air in front of the being, as big as it was! Easily big enough to step through, though the being didn't do that. It looked through, and I came up behind it to look through myself.

“0% temporal synchronization,” I ordered, and the action stopped again. I looked through to another world, a very bizarre world indeed, and I had seen some odd ones in my time. I didn't want to poke my head through without learning more, but from the opening I could see a red sky and a horizon that seemed to curve upwards, rather than down. It seemed some kind of forest, as plant life was everywhere, and there, impossibly, was the creature again! If that expression was one of triumph I would be shocked, it seemed even more wary now than before. It was caught in a crouch, and it seemed like the plant life, if that's what it was, had started reaching branches out to capture it. I had seen carnivorous plants before, but as I went back to 10% time synchronization I realized I had never seen any like this.

The plants tore the poor creature apart, while the being still here stood and watched through the portal as it was devoured. It didn't take long.

The portal closed, and the being calmly got out a long, narrow something and made a mark with it on their hand. Wait, the weapon it was holding looked different now! That was the least of my concerns as I watched as the being calmly strode away, leaving the area in chaos and terror.

I stepped “left” and considered following the individual, but decided I could home in on that vibrational anomaly again anytime, so I stayed to watch what happened here. There was some bustle for a while, and people were kept from the larger pieces of wreckage, and those that were injured were tended to. There seemed to be a lot of shouting and stalking about by people all wearing a similar covering, those carried what I recognized as weapons. Perhaps some kind of peace keeping force, but a little too late from what I saw. If they could even have done anything, which I doubted.

This planet had intrigued me, but those were just the first surprises I encountered on the planet I came to know as “Earth.”

Information Gathering

A database cannot draw conclusions.

I was once again high above the planet, watching the tapestry of sins shift and change beneath me as I considered this world. What was my next move? I wanted to learn more about the ability of that being to create directed energy weapon fire from nothing, and about the strange place the creature had fled to. Obviously it had fled there to try and get away from the other, but had found itself in a bad position. Had it chosen to be killed in that manner rather than be captured? Had it been a mistake? At this point I couldn't be sure. A thought came to me- was that one being unique? I brightened, there was a way I could find out, and perhaps answer some other questions about this world at the same time. I stepped "right," the world beneath me coming to an instant halt, and activated certain circuitry in my armor.

It was time for a planetary scan!

A ball of light formed between my two upper appendages, which I then released. It flew towards the planet at a speed even I could hardly track, and impacted the surface. I watched as it "slowly" formed a great ring, rolling across the entire surface of the world gathering data for me. When it was halfway through I willed myself to the opposite side of the world and watched as it now shrank, coming again into a ball and flying towards me. I allowed it to impact my armor and information flooded into my databases, much faster than I could perceive. My armor systems began immediately cataloging and tagging the information so whatever I asked about could be answered. I stepped "left," not needing to maintain the energy cost of holding

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myself steady in respect to their time. There was no rush, and my armor would soon have the answers I needed.

What question to ask first? Ah, of course! “Approximate number of vibrational disturbances upon the surface?” The “approximate” being necessary because my armor would otherwise relate the exact number, to the individual being. Even I didn’t have time for that.

“Six hundred,” came the reply.

“Approximate total planetary population?”

“Eight billion.”

“So hardly even worth mentioning?”

“Affirmative.”

“So those beings that can hide themselves from the others are almost so rare as to be nonexistent? That’s a pity, a larger sample size would increase the amount of data I could gather about them. Are they distinct?”

“Affirmative. All share the same base vibrational frequency but enough variation exists to allow tracking of individuals.”

“Excellent! We have one “specimen” tagged already, let’s go see what it did after leaving the area we were in.” I willed myself to appear in that location, knowing my armor would make the necessary inquiries into the database to bring me to the proper place.

I stayed where I was.

I hadn’t felt fear- real, honest to goodness fear since I awoke and found this armored shell around me. Since then, nothing had been able to even interact with me unless I willed it. I, sometimes in my anger over a species’ deplorable behavior, had destroyed entire civilizations that were too far gone to be allowed to continue. Never- never had my armor failed to obey a command until now. What was wrong? After all this time, was my armor... broken?

“Explanation for delay?” I hesitantly asked, dreading the silence that would inevitably follow my question.

“Target individual cannot be tracked.”

I relaxed- slightly. If my armor could still respond to me it wasn’t broken somehow, improbable as that would be. I had never considered it running down or failing, but perhaps it was prudent to think about that possibility? After my study of this planet was done, I told myself, I would look into creating certain backup plans should my armor show signs of malfunction. After all, who was there to repair it? Or was this a sign of malfunction itself?

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“Explain how that is possible.”

“Unknown. Even a non-living organism would still be vibrationally separate from this universe. The only conclusion is that target being has left the planet.”

But these beings only had the most primitive of spacecraft, and there were none of more advanced creation in orbit, I had checked that when I first arrived. Unless...

“It may have made another of those holes to that odd world and stepped through. That would account for the anomaly.”

“80% probability this is correct.”

Well! Even I could only study one world at a time. The mystery of the odd place I had glimpsed earlier would have to wait.

“Continue regular scans. I want to know when that being comes back into this world.”

“Affirmative.”

Now what, I asked myself. I could see what other hidden individuals were doing, but I felt a connection to that first one I had seen. It was probably silly, but I wanted to wait for that one to reappear in the world. Still, if a world held one surprise, perhaps it held others. My planetary scan was quite thorough.

“Were other anomalous phenomena recorded that were not vibrational in nature?”

“Affirmative.”

I was pleased, this world did still have secrets I could look into while I was waiting. “How many?”

“Seventeen distinct phenomena recorded, one hundred twenty three locations.”

Seventeen! This world was a jewel! There was no doubt about it, worthy or not, it had captured my attention. “Choose one at random and take me there.”

I found myself in a small room with a being bent over an object on a table. Books lay open about a being doing some strange work, and other objects, possibly of ritual significance lay precisely placed along the table as well. What caught my attention, however, were the ribbons of energy that hung in the air, glowing in multiple colors. As I stood and watched the being would consult one of his books, then turn back to the energy ribbons and add another one very precisely. Centrally, an object smaller than one of these being’s heads rested on a stand, and the ribbons of energy wound around it in

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the air. The being would touch one of the objects to the table and pull it away, leaving a new ribbon, which it pinched off and then threaded through the others. I ran a scan, and as energy was pulled out of the object it became more immaterial, as though the object itself was being translated into energy and being fed into those ribbons. Each object was already quite indistinct, as though the being had been at work for some time. I sensed movement behind me and jerked my vision, noting the second figure in the room I had totally missed upon my arrival. The strange ribbon energy had consumed my attention, an embarrassing lapse on my part. I hadn't even noted the presence of the second being. I knew I couldn't be harmed or even sensed by the beings, but that was no reason to become sloppy! And who knew what surprises still awaited me? Best to not take any chances with these beings until I had cataloged all they could do.

I watched for some time as the being finished using up all the objects around him, turning them into energy. It studied the air from all angles, consulting the books and nudging things this way and that. The resulting product was quite beautiful, I had to admit. Was this being a sculptor of some kind? Was it making an art piece? A very strange one, if so- it couldn't last! This fact was a minor mystery against how exactly this being was converting matter to energy with such ease in the first place. What exactly maintained those ribbons in that configuration? I had seen other artists create pieces with light, but always with special platforms that refreshed the image or special films to capture the photons and later display them. I scanned the table under the object- it was just murdered plant life, shaped into a certain configuration and held together with heavy element fasteners. Nothing special.

The two beings looked at each other, and the one working placed his hands lightly on the edges of the ribbons and closed his eyes. I watched with anticipation- what exactly was going to happen? Suddenly the man drew the ribbons together all at once, causing them to wrap tightly around the central object, where he strained to keep them. I watched in amazement as they sank into the object and disappeared, making the being relax. It straightened, then handed the object over to the other being, who put it around their neck after attaching a thin chain to the top.

The two beings then left the room and I followed, puzzled. What was the point of all that? The art object was gone, could it be called out again from that central object? Why wear it in that position? I was clearly missing something but I was unsure as to what. They stopped and I saw the artist, if that's what he was, pick up a shaped length of murdered plant life

and gesture to the other. He held it like a weapon, and I was concerned that violence was about to begin here. But the other didn't try to get away or struggle, so I must be wrong. That being seemed to answer affirmatively, and the one holding the weapon smashed it into the other's chest. I was right, violence! But why do harm after taking such pains to create that- The instant the weapon was about to hit the other figure it suddenly bounced off, and it became clear what that strange object was.

"That being just made the other a force field," I said, stunned.

"Energy barrier detected around being wearing the object," my armor agreed.

I scanned the object again, and yes, it was still just solid metal to the core. That was unchanged from before all those ribbons of energy sank into it. The one being seemed satisfied, and took from his pocket a large wad of green rectangles, which he passed to the other being. That being set the weapon down and took them, nodding his head as he began to count the individual pieces. I hardly noticed, I was fixated on the object. It had no power supply, no circuitry. How could a force field come from it? I scanned the being carefully, there was no other explanation for the field, it must be coming from that object. My armor squawked a warning: "Space folding in progress!"

"You mean-" But the being was gone, and air rushed in to account for the vacuum it left behind. This tore the objects out of the other being's hands and forced him to scramble around to catch them. I could hardly see him, my thoughts were rolling. Personal space folding- in essence, a teleport, but without any external means? Force shields without power supplies? Hidden predators? This planet wasn't interesting, it was a madhouse!

Violence

Can't we all just get along?

I willed myself back out of the atmosphere of the planet and hung there, my thoughts boiling. Oh, I had experience with teleportation, hadn't I just, in essence, done the same myself? But that was an ability granted me by the armor- I just came along for the ride. Other species I had investigated had created devices to allow them to teleport, but my armor was the smallest and most advanced I had ever seen. But now this being casually, scarcely without a second thought, teleported away right in front of me. After taking a staggering blow to the chest that was stopped by a force field another being had made for him. And the one left behind seemed more concerned with his green rectangles than with the being disappearing right in front of him, so it wasn't something to be afraid of. But did I really just see that? Perhaps it wasn't the armor breaking down that I should be worried about... but myself.

Still, it didn't hurt to be sure.

"Run full diagnostic," I commanded the armor. Indicator lights in my visor lit as tests were performed. None were dark, so as far as my armor could tell, both it and myself were operating normally. I had seen a being teleport under its own power. The implications were staggering!

Alert, my armor read out on the display, notification of requested event: return of specified vibrational anomaly.

I shoved the thoughts aside, readying myself for more strangeness from the beings living here, and mentally commanded my armor to take me there.

I found myself in an open area, standing beside a small wheeled structure. I looked around and found the being I had seen before, looking somewhat worse off. The covering of the being was all torn up, and it was apparently wounded in several places. Two other figures looked up from a small fire before them, and the smaller one jumped up and threw its arms around the returning one. The other got up as well, and they seemed to be talking. The returning one showed her hand, where I noticed many more markings than previously, and wondered if this being had murdered a predator like the one I saw for each. It seemed highly probable.

I took in details of the scene, noticing the two others did not carry the primitive edged weapon the returning one did. Then an interesting thought struck me.

“Scan for vibrational disturbances.”

“Scanning. Only one vibrational disturbance detected.”

I was right! Then I thought for a second about what that meant and realized it just left me more confused. Obviously these beings could see the one with the vibrational difference where the beings back by the attack obviously could not. I scanned the other two and found little to distinguish them from other beings; as expected no implants to simplify the explanation. While I was doing that, the smaller being sat back down and I received another surprise- a second being, looking exactly like the first but with different coverings appeared! In fact, the second being seemed to step directly from the first, and the first went limp as though dead.

I quickly scanned the body and determined it was not dead, just inert, and watched as the now vibrationally different being began waving their hands about. The wounds of the returning being closed up, and the taller one nodded as if pleased. This healing surprised me, but as I had seen the first create directed energy fire, it made sense another could produce a healing effect. Why not? I had given up for the moment trying to understand how this all happened, now just taking it in and cataloging the various abilities of these beings for later analysis.

The one being vanished again after placing a hand on the other body, and the returning being went into the structure. I stuck my head through the side and, as expected, there was a body similar to it lying inert inside. I directed a scan at the body so I could record the event, and watched with interest as the two beings became one. The now complete being I noticed was now vibrationally similar to the surroundings, and was stretching as though leaving a period of inactivity. Which in a way, I suppose it was.

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I felt I would be best served by staying with this particular group for the time being, for several reasons. I wanted to see if the taller group member could manifest a body in this way. I wanted to see if the predator it fought was the only kind, or if there were many kinds. I wanted to see what other abilities the beings would express. Staying near them seemed the best course of action.

The returning one ate heavily, then all three went into the structure and laid down. Were they going to manifest again? I watched impatiently.

Nothing happened.

I scanned them again, and saw that their brainwave patterns had changed. Apparently creatures on this world required a dormancy period, which was unsurprising. Most beings I had encountered did, at one time or another. Impatience was unlike me, but I hadn't been this curious about a species for some time. I thought about what to do. *I can come back when they began moving again...* but that didn't appeal. I might get side tracked with more wonders and miss something important here. I decided to step further "right," increasing the difference between our two time references and allowing their inactive period to pass in a flash. Once they were up and moving I eagerly awaited their next astonishing acts.

Sadly, I was forced to wait for two more dormancy periods, during which they traveled in their mobile structure. At least I learned some things about normal life on this planet. Until I realized that maybe these beings weren't normal at all! After all, the beings at the attack site couldn't see these "spirit hunters" as they called themselves. I had learned the language by this time, and figured out the differences between the two genders. I was also beginning to understand their facial gestures and body language, which seemed to account for at least some of their total communication abilities. As far as them being normal "humans," I would have to compare their activities with others of their species to see how common this sort of thing was.

The three stopped into some sort of central office, then were sent out again. They were discussing various dangers of the male they had been assigned to "take care of," which seemingly had a variety of meanings. The two younger humans were always arguing about who should "take care of" a variety of domestic tasks, so I wasn't certain of the usage in this case.

I hadn't yet realized everything about these three related to violence.

When they got near their destination they found a place to leave their vehicle and all three “went into spirit form.” I still didn’t know exactly how they managed this, but soon all three were holding “swords” and running across rooftops. They stopped and crept closer to a certain house, and I realized exactly what “take care of” meant. They forced their way into the residence and searched the surroundings, often stopping to close their eyes as if somehow sensing without them. My scans didn’t reveal any other sense organs beyond the obvious ones but given the things I had seen, I couldn’t discount the possibility. I knew they must have been looking for the being underground, which my scans had shown me immediately.

Suddenly one of the spirit hunters grew excited, and I wondered exactly how she had realized she was directly above the being. She smashed through the floor, and all three jumped down into the hole. The man there was totally outmatched, but the curious thing was he seemed to create creatures to fight for him! Out of thin air he materialized several bizarre looking beings, which the three spirit hunters quickly dispatched. They then cut the man down where he stood, and left, satisfied.

The action of these three didn’t make sense. They didn’t steal anything from the house, so they were not thieves. But they did not follow the law processes I had seen followed in my initial observation of the justice system of this world. Of this continent, I should clarify, as other continents seemed to have other systems. What had this man done to deserve this sort of treatment? Were the creatures some kind of illusion? If so why did the spirit hunters take such pains to destroy them? How did the man see the spirit hunters when the people at the “mall” did not? As they left and re-joined their bodies I stayed and looked down at the unfortunate man they had killed. Was this planet on the wrong track after all? My initial thought was these spirit hunters were beneficial, destroying predators that the general population couldn’t see. But now... this brutal act showed me I still had a lot of information to gather before I could make a decision.

I spent many “weeks” looking into various aspects of the different cultures and people on the planet, but I felt more at a loss than ever. I had seen more miracles performed on this world than on any six before it. The sick- healed, just by laying on of hands. Matter changed in both form and substance, something that I would have said impossible before, but for the most technologically advanced species. I even saw a person tell another their future, and days later that prediction came true! It was staggering. However, with all this going on, those with real power seemed to operate in

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secret, or as a last resort. Why? *Why?* I couldn't figure that out. Yes, there were few of them that had real abilities, but shouldn't that make them even more precious? Why were those that could tell the future not in positions of power, where their gifts could benefit the most people? Why were there hospitals full of sick people when a touch and a moment of concentration could heal them?

It made no sense.

I had to learn the answer to this question before doing anything for this planet, good or ill. If there was some check, some balance that kept these people hiding, disrupting it could have massive consequences. I was beginning to admire these people as I learned of their history (which was often brutal) as they were slowly beginning to think like responsible beings. Most civilizations I encountered had violence in their pasts, it was inevitable. The real test was, could they put that past aside, while not forgetting it, so it didn't come back to haunt them? I thought maybe they could.

But the question remained; were these people with extraordinary abilities a positive thing for the world? Or did they hide because they had been judged harmful and cast out? I decided the thing to do would be to follow an individual, or small group of individuals as they came into their power. By following someone young perhaps they would ask the same questions I had, and get the answers I desperately needed. I was in the process of selecting someone with a vast potential (the better to see how the planet would react to someone truly powerful arising) when the most extraordinary thing I had yet seen happened in a most unlikely place.

Change

Hey mister, got any loose change?

“Warning! Warning!” my armor flashed up onto my visor.

“Explain!” I demanded.

“Intense energy discharge detected. Unknown composition. Unknown intent. Recommend investigation.”

I willed myself into the center of the event and my sensors began taking in information. All around me, a red haze permeated the air which crackled with a bizarre energy discharge. I saw I was in a “school” and it was past the sunset point on this part of the planet. All around me, young humans stared in horror at the event going on around them, and some dropped to the floor, limp. There was silence and several lights blew out overhead.

“Begin a deep-” I started to say, when the energy levels around me returned to normal and the red glow disappeared.

“Energy event has ceased,” my armor said, unnecessarily. However it did seem to brighten up. “Vibrational anomalies detected.” Was it getting a... personality? That was a minor question against what was going on here.

Older humans streamed from the side walls to check on the younger ones that had fallen, but I noticed that three of the fallen humans were being totally overlooked now. I walked over to them and scanned them. They seemed to be in some pain and their features were actually changing right before my eyes! My visor, predictably, showed these three as being the source of the vibrational anomalies in the area, and I gazed down at them, puzzled. From my initial experience with the “spirit hunters” I knew that these three had just ceased to be as far as the others were concerned, and

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would receive no help. I couldn't help them either, at least not in any obvious way, but I had learned enough about the human brain to at least ease their pain, which I did.

They went limp and continued transforming before my eyes, one girl growing enormous wings from her back that burst through her covering. Another was growing a great set of horns from his head, and a third female was seeming to just fade away, becoming about 50% transparent. The transformation ended, only taking a few "minutes" as the other young humans that had collapsed were brought around.

It seemed the human brain is adept at brushing things off, as rather than begin an immediate investigation, music started playing and this event, whatever it was, continued. I noticed with some dark amusement that three human shaped patches of floor were now carefully and unconsciously avoided by everyone in the room. One would think that if something was beyond the perception of a human, that human would blunder into it. This was not the case with those that exhibited the vibrational anomaly. It was as though the space occupied by the unseen thing just didn't exist anymore for those that couldn't perceive it. Very strange, I thought. Within fifteen "minutes" everyone seemed to forget the event even happened, but I was pretty certain something unique had gone on here that I wanted to understand.

My visor flashed two interesting pieces of information into my vision. The first: that a very, very slight, hardly perceptible tremor was now radiating out from this building. A tremor which was increasing and within hours would be perceptible by anyone. The second was an individual meeting my criteria for examination had been discovered from my ongoing scans.

I was totally unsurprised when the armor directed me to a young female in this very room.

After all, it made a certain perverted sense.

The individual showed a tremendous potential for both power and ability, exactly what I was looking for. She wore glasses and had an odd white streak down the center of her hair. The rest of it was red, which I had learned was a rather rare color among humans. She was quite a bit smaller than the others in the room, but that didn't seem to bother her as she was talking animatedly with others there. Obviously this event had caused some manifestation of abilities in at least the three still unconscious humans, so

there was a good chance others apart from them would exhibit abilities in the near future. This meant that they didn't have the abilities before, and would be guided through their use. This would answer my questions about this world in the process.

This was exactly what I had in mind, so I took deep scans of her and everyone else in the room so I could compare them to scans I took later. I also scanned the area but found no trace of anomalous energies. Whatever had caused these strange happenings had come and gone, leaving no clue behind. I felt bad for the three vibrationally separate individuals, who by this time were awake and aware something about them had changed. They tried to get others to notice them, but it was no use. Even things they wrote on paper and showed other people were ignored. I wasn't sure I could even help them, not knowing how to change their vibrational frequency to what was proper. That would be a pretty radical change to their makeup, and more than I wanted to risk right now. There was enough for people to investigate here, if someone did, without adding my abilities into it. I wished them well as they sat forlornly on a bench outside the school, people streaming past them later that night.

This young female enjoyed the remainder of her time before leaving, even as the vibrations around the building continued to build. Not to any level perceivable by them, but my scans showed it quite clearly. I scanned the area and found no trace of machinery or natural phenomena causing it, but hoped it wouldn't get too bad or it might ultimately become a problem. She was driven home, and I was mildly amused to discover the faint Earth tremor was centered around this young human. I watched with interest from above as the center moved exactly as her vehicle did, and stopped to be exactly centered on her place of residence. Obviously this young female was beginning to overflow with such power it was causing the very Earth to shake beneath her! I was looking forward to seeing exactly how that problem was dealt with.

I calculated that, if the tremor continued to grow in strength on a linear basis, by the time the sun rose it would be very noticeable. I settled down in her place of residence to see if my calculations were correct. I noticed there were three other people in the house living with her. Two other young humans, one very young by the looks of her, one older male, and the mother. No adult male was in evidence, but given the much larger mysteries of the evening, that was hardly worth consideration. Looking about her

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room I saw a variety of books on various subjects, most with pieces of wood pulp sticking out. Did no one hold her attention, or was she trying to read them all simultaneously? Another minor mystery.

She readied herself for her dormancy period and I wondered if I should step further “right” again, to accelerate the moment of her waking. I decided a compromise was called for. I jumped ahead an hour at a time to see how the ground vibrations were progressing and indeed, they were following the predicted course exactly. I was about to jump ahead another hour when I noticed the young human having some difficulty with her dormancy.

I had studied human brains enough to recognize the dream state their brains used for various functions but knew that usually their motor functions were cut off during this time. Not so for this young human, she was whimpering and thrashing in a most distressing manner. I watched for a moment and came to a decision: I would try a technique I had been successful with in the past. I moved to where her head was, taking no notice of the wall as I passed through it, and placed my armored hand directly into her head. Circuits activating, they began to interpret the electrical impulses and fed them into my visor system as images, so I could essentially “see” what she was dreaming. But more than that I wanted to feel what she was experiencing, to see if it would give me greater insights into her transformation process. I commanded further synchronization and felt myself slide into her dream.

My name was Elizabeth Malkuwitze, and I was very frightened. I had been stumbling through an odd landscape for what must have been hours, seemingly underground. I could see clearly, and a series of tunnels had opened before me, where I was currently lost. Almost immediately after I found myself in this tunnel, ants as big as I was marched through, past me. At first I had been terrified of them, but they didn’t attack me so after a while that wore off a bit and I was just mildly afraid. They had wings, and some carried food or eggs as they went past, mandibles clicking as though in greeting to each other. It was a steady stream of them going past me, not even bothering to look at me longer than it took to issue what must have been a polite greeting. Really, how can one tell with ants?

Finally, one came to a halt before me, an ant I seemed to recognize, as bizarre as that sounds. Unlike the others it looked directly at me and seemed somehow expectant. I somehow knew this ant would lead me out of this place and back into the sun, so I nodded to it and it turned around,

ready to lead me. My fear was gone as if it had never been. This creature made me feel safe, as though all along we had been searching for each other and were now at last together. All was right- she would protect me, that is what I felt. We made our way upward, and I had to scramble a bit over the more sloped tunnels the ant walked up naturally. She turned to me, tapped the ground, and it reformed, forming into hand holds, and I smiled gratefully at it. We continued. We came to a dead end, and again the ant tapped, but this time on the ceiling, where a hole opened. Sunlight spilled through into the darkness, and I smelled fresh air. The ant went first, and I climbed out after, finding myself atop a large ant hill.

Looking around I realized we were in some kind of forest, and that I hadn't been shrunk as I expected, because the trees were the right size- these ants were really as big as I was! The ant looked at me, and understanding seemed to pass between us. He was to be my protector, now and always, and it was his power that would allow me to help people as I always wanted, even if I had no training in the task at hand.

"You finally emerge, little one," said a melodious woman's voice behind me.

I whirled around, and the ant flicked its wings and landed in front of me, pincers clicking. At the bottom of the hill was a fox with nine tails, sitting there and looking up at me, amused.

"An ant. How quaint. What a hard little worker you must be then," said the fox, suddenly shimmering. A beautiful woman stood there, stretching. "It's nice to finally meet you, face to face." Oddly, the woman still had nine tails behind her, and they moved almost hypnotically. "Why don't you come down here and we'll talk?"

The ant put a leg up as though to stop me, as if I would walk down into the embrace of this strange woman. I noticed even though she wasn't shouting I could hear her quite clearly, so I asked down to her, "Who are you?"

"Why, don't you know?" she asked, laughing. "I'm you. I'm the part of you that longs for fire. To run like the wind, and have the attention of boys over all others. And when you're through with them, discard them." She said "discard them" like she meant "kill them." I was horrified.

"I wouldn't do that!"

"But you could, little one, you could. You have the power inside yourself. I'm proof of that. What does that stupid ant offer you that I can't? I offer you fire, glorious heat, revenge on all the tiny people who will never understand what you are like I do. Choose me, and I'll give you the world."

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The ant looked back at me, and I somehow knew that if I did give into this monster inside me, it could do whatever it wanted despite my wishes. I knew, somehow, that it wanted to take me over, use my body for its own. Every time I allowed it out, that meant she got a little bit closer to that goal, and another little piece of me would be stripped away.

“You’re really going to take the word of an ant over me?” The woman seemed amused. “Would you chose to become the ant, then, when you could have this glorious body of mine as your own?” She swayed a little, her tails still moving hypnotically. “Together I think you would be... quite hideous, no offense. Still, there’s no rush. I’ll always be with you, we are one and the same. Some day, when you’re done playing in the dirt, you’ll come crawling to me, begging for my help. Then you will be mine.” The woman, no, she was a fox again, seemed to grow, larger and larger. “Together we’ll crush this stupid ant and I’ll take my rightful place as your spirit guide, as it was always intended.”

In response the ant started to grow as well, and in seconds they both towered over me, and started circling each other. “I guess you’re not as helpless as you appear, insect,” said the fox scornfully. “Breaking you should be very, very fun.”

“No!!!” I screamed, and forced my eyes open again, finding myself in the arms of my mother, who was shaking me, trying to wake me up.

I jerked back, coming into awareness of my surroundings again, and was surprised to see it was now light outside. *That* was how humans dreamed? It would explain a lot, and I looked around Elizabeth’s room to find the tremor now at full strength, as small items tumbled off shelves and the nearest window cracked. Oh, there was power in this child all right. But could she learn to harness and control it? I turned my attention back to the two females in the room, the older rocking the younger and trying to sooth her.

“Oh it was horrible, there was this fox, and she turned into a woman and she was fighting this ant. And she offered me power and said the ant couldn’t give me what I wanted and-”

“There there, it was just a dream. Probably brought on by this weird earthquake we seem to be having.”

Elizabeth looked around as though noticing for the first time. “We don’t get earthquakes in Rochester! We just get half a year of snow.”

“We’re having one today apparently. Are you okay?”

“I guess. I feel weird, like someone’s watching me. Watching... through me.” She visibly shivered.

“How about some breakfast? That should chase your demons away.”
“That’ll be great mom, I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Now that Elizabeth had calmed down a little the tremor eased off as well, but the walls were still vibrating so she obviously didn’t know it was her. When she finished breakfast she caught sight of news vans outside, and there was a reporter speaking into a microphone right near her house! She ran and turned on her “television” and laughed with delight, there was the same woman! She turned up the volume.

“I’m standing here in Penfield as the strange localized earthquake continues. Experts in the area are baffled as to the strange occurrence that began around three AM this morning and shows no signs of stopping any time soon.”

Elizabeth got out a small portable computer and started tapping away on it. I looked over her shoulder and read *Hey Matt, is there an earthquake where you are? Turn on the news, you can almost see my house!*

The person in the picture continued. “This is just the latest in a bizarre series of happenings in this neighborhood seemingly centered on Bay Trail High School.”

Oh, so they did notice, did they? I thought excitedly. *This should be very informative.*

“Several students from that school have gone missing since last night, where a Valentine’s Day dance was held. Several students collapsed during the event, and one student’s home was mysteriously burned to the ground last night. The people that live there are also missing, and presumed dead. Firefighters are combing through the wreckage of what can only be called an explosion, looking for clues as to the cause. If anyone has information on this, or the whereabouts of Suzan Rosini, Dan Huntington, Lilly Patterson or Tom Little, please call 911 immediately.”

As the scene changed back to the newsroom, the phone in Elizabeth’s hand produced a tone. She put it to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Liz, it’s me. I only just caught the end of that. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. But a bunch of people went missing from the dance last night!”

“No way!”

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“I know. I didn’t see anything, did you?”

There was a pause. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Are you okay? You sound weird.”

“Yeah, I’m fine. What else?”

“Some house blew up apparently. They didn’t say who it belonged to. Hey is there an earthquake where you are?”

“No. Should there be?”

“There’s one here. It’s getting on my nerves. It’s not bad, just... everything’s shaking. Are you sure you’re okay? You sound like you’re in a bathroom.”

“I just had a weird dream last night. And-”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know. I think I’m hearing a voice.”

“A voice? Did it like, offer you power or something?”

“What? No. I can’t understand it. It’s like a whisper. I don’t know. Something funny is going on with- what did you mean, ‘offer me power?’”

“I had a weird dream too, there was this fox that turned into a lady. She said I should choose her over the ant, that she could give me what I wanted better than it could.”

“Wait, ant? Start at the beginning, would you?”

“I was in this weird ant hill, and there were these huge ants there. One led me out and it was like ‘I’ll protect you little girl.’”

“It talked to you?”

“No, I just felt it, you know?”

“And then you saw the fox?”

“Right. What was yours about?”

“The school, and flying around. There was some big pentagram on the roof, can you believe it? And just this whispery voice, and feeling like something had gone very wrong.”

“That was vague.”

“It was a dream, what do you want from me?”

“I don’t know. Look, I’m going to call Dee, you call Sam, okay? I want to see if they dreamed anything weird.”

“Yeah, okay. Text me back.”

“You got it.”

What a fascinating exchange, I thought. And it looks like some young humans known to Elizabeth have been changed by this event as well. Interesting.

“Hey Dee, it’s Liz!”

“What’s up?”

“This is going to sound like a really weird question, but did you have a funny dream last night?”

“How did you know?”

“You did? You really, really did? Promise?”

“Yeah, what’s the big deal?”

“Both Matt and me did! What was yours about?”

“Um... Jesheu.” she muttered.

“What, I couldn’t hear you!”

“I said it was about Jesus.”

“Jesus?”

Elizabeth’s mother stuck her head into the room, scowling. She pretended not to see it.

“Yeah. He came to me and said that he loved me, and now was the time to be strong, and that I had been chosen to wield great holy power.”

“Wow, that’s way better than mine.”

“What was yours?”

Elizabeth proceeded to explain the dream again, and the news she had seen.

“Wow, that’s freaky. An earthquake, huh?”

“Tell me about it. I have to tell Matt, stay near your phone okay?”

“Okay.”

She used her device’s keyboard and communicated with the young male she called Matt, who relayed that this male called Sam said he was seeing ‘dead people’ as well. He also had a dream about being a historical figure the night before. He invited Elizabeth over, but her mother said that afternoon was fine, after she finished her “homework,” whatever that was.

I watched her do this “homework,” which seemed to be a bunch of unrelated subjects of dubious importance. The activity seemed centered mainly around the memorization of facts easily accessible via any computer in the world. She seemed to be repeating phrases to herself, a very questionable activity, but then I realized she must be practicing a different language. My armor would be, as always, translating it for me without having to think about it. That at least made a little more sense. Why the planet hadn’t just standardized on one language baffled me, it should be easy enough to do...

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After a midday meal Elizabeth was taken to see her friends, and was the first to arrive at Matt's house. She was let in, and stopped dead on seeing his face. He too had red hair and wore glasses, making me think that somehow this was a relative of hers that lived apart from her. A scan showed they were unrelated, but the similarities were striking. In any case, she was staring at him, and no wonder: there was a vibrational anomaly inside his face.

Getting Used To It

And now for something completely different.

“Your eyes are weird!” said Liz.

“So you can see that? My parents insisted they were totally normal. I stopped asking because they were starting to think I was nuts, I think.”

“I can see them.”

Interesting. Whatever it was that happened last night has allowed these humans to perceive the vibrational anomaly.

“Do you feel a shaking?”

“Yeah, I thought you said it wasn’t quaking around here.”

“It wasn’t until a little earlier.”

“That’s weird.”

Is this girl not very bright, or just unperceptive? I noticed that Matt was staring off into space. Liz snapped her fingers under his nose.

“Uh, Earth to Matt?”

“Sorry. It’s the voice. I can, uh, understand it now.”

“What’s it saying?”

“That I’m not crazy.”

“You’re going to listen to the voice in your head tell you that you aren’t crazy?”

“I don’t want to listen to it at all!”

He paused.

“Then explain it. Make sense already!”

“Okay, that’s not creepy.”

There was a noise, and the two looked towards the door. “The others must be here,” said Liz, opening the door. There stood two other young humans, both who were at the event the night before. One had very long hair,

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as though he had never cut it in his life, and it was twisted up into more easily manageable sections. He looked a bit stronger than the other boy, as though he purposefully was building up his muscle mass. The other girl was unremarkable.

“Come on in,” said Liz. “You can all watch Matt talk to the voice in his head.”

“What’s with your eyes man?” asked Sam, walking in.

“What do you mean, Samson?” replied Matt, looking past Sam.

“How did you know about that?”

“About what?” asked Dee.

“Quiet, quiet, I’m trying to listen!” hissed Matt.

“Sorry,” said Dee sarcastically.

“Come on, let’s go sit down,” Liz said, resigned. She started climbing the stairs after shutting the door. “His parents already think he’s nuts, let’s not add fuel to that particular fire.”

All four went upstairs and arranged themselves in Matt’s room, waiting for him to speak again.

“Okay, he says he’s an angel, name of Terathel-”

“Terror Fell?” asked Dee, shocked. The three look back and forth. “Because that’s a great angel name.”

“He says he can prove it.”

“Prove his name is Terathel? I don’t see what good that’s going to do.”

“No, prove he’s an angel, of course!”

“Oh. Well, get on with it then.”

“He says you’ll only be able to see him a split second, so get ready.”

Thank you for the warning, I thought, stepping “left” to give myself extra time to study what’s going to happen. Matt slowly stood up and around his body, this being with white wings suddenly appeared as though superimposed over top of him. I brought my synchronization to 0% and study the being in detail.

“Now where did that come from?”

“Unknown at this time,” my armor answered.

It seemed to look like a regular human, if that human was a perfect example of the species. Large, white, feathery wings protruded from its back, and in one hand it carried an ornate scepter that glowed with an internal light. This form was literally superimposed over Matt’s body, covering him like a second skin. I admit, I was impressed- it wasn’t something even I saw every day. But what exactly was it? A manifestation of Matt’s power? Some other being made of energy now attached to him somehow? The young humans called it an “Angel” which I would have to look into.

I stepped “right,” resuming the normal flow of time, and the figure vanished. It caused quite a stir with the others.

“Did you see it? What was it?” asked Matt. *Ah, obviously, being in the center he didn’t see anything.*

“It looked like-” started Sam.

“No, don’t say anything,” shouted Liz, putting her hand over his mouth. “I want to make sure we all saw the same thing.”

She grabbed some paper off his desk and passed it out, and they started writing out what they had seen. I read over their shoulders and they gave a pretty good description, all told. I turned back to Matt who was looking at his hands as if he had never seen them before.

“Deep scan,” I commanded. “See if you can find that... angel, thing, whatever it is.”

“Scanning.”

The scan concluded by the time they were finished writing. “No trace can be found,” my armor reported.

Figures.

After agreeing they all saw the same thing, Liz spoke up.

“But how do we know it’s an angel and not just something that looks like an angel? I mean it could be anything!”

“Like an alien?” asked Sam. As the alien in the room, I felt a little uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. Something.”

“Until we meet someone that can tell us one way or the other, right now it’s our only source of information,” began Matt. “Until it leads me wrong I’m inclined to believe it. And I can’t exactly send it away, now can I? For right now it says it can help us understand a little of what’s going on so let’s hear what it has to say.”

An unspoken understanding seemed to pass among the others as they looked at each other, and Sam shrugged. “Okay, so tell us what’s going on. I dreamed I was Samson, how did you know about that? I didn’t name any names.”

Matt listened for a moment. “He says that he recognized your soul as being the reincarnation of Samson.”

“Is that even possible?”

“He says that souls in Heaven can return to Earth if they choose, to experience life again or to accomplish some task only they can do.”

“Wow. Wait, does that mean I’m going to get betrayed by someone I love and then kill myself for it? I mean, am I going to live his life again or my own?”

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“He says that’s hard to say for sure.”

“Great, something to look forward to either way.”

“What about me?” Liz asks.

Yes, *what about her?* I knew she had potential because of the energy my scans told me was inside her, but I didn’t know the specifics of what she could do.

“He says he’s not too sure. Your powers aren’t holy or angelic in nature, and he’s never had to do something like this before so he’s kind of rusty at it.”

“Oh.”

What does a metal oxidation process have to do with it? Must be some sort of local colloquialism. Oh well, certainly someone in the know will be along to turn off this Earth shaking. I’m sure whoever that is can explain.

“But he says Dee’s powers are. She will be able to wield holy powers, and do things like drive out demons, and heal people by touch.”

“Wow, really? That sounds great!”

“It sure does,” echoes Sam.

“Great, where does that leave me?” asks Liz.

The others shake their heads.

“Now you said something about ghosts?” Matt asks Sam.

“Yes, at the synagogue this morning. There’s a graveyard nearby and a bunch of people seemed to be milling around there. Usually no one is so I paid more attention to them. One of them had a hole in his head! That’s how I knew they were ghosts.”

“Define ‘ghosts’,” I told my armor.

“Only a local definition can be found.”

“Okay, let me have that.”

It blinked some text up onto my visor: “An apparition of a dead person that is believed to appear or become manifest to the living, typically as a nebulous image.”

“That’s certainly a unique cultural belief,” I remarked.

“I wonder if we can all see them?” asked Dee. “I’d love to see a real ghost!”

“Are you sure about that?” Liz asked.

“We need to see what we can do now, right? It beats just sitting around here worrying about stuff.”

“Or we could just go home, forget the whole thing ever happened, and go on with our lives.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t know what powers you got.”

“No I’m saying it because... Oh, fine, whatever. But isn’t your synagogue a long way away from here?”

“Yeah.” Sam looked crestfallen.

“Wait, there’s maybe another ghost we can go look at!” said Matt excitedly. “On the way back home yesterday I saw this kid standing by one of those, you know, roadside monuments? He wasn’t wearing a coat, which is weird because it was so cold. I’m pretty sure he was a ghost. I’ll go ask my mom, we can walk there.”

“In the snow?” said Liz.

“Don’t be such a downer Liz, get into the spirit.”

“Oh, very funny. Ha ha. That was two months ago. I save all my spirit for December. I don’t want to go visiting other spirits if you know what I mean.”

“Oh come on, it’ll be fun!”

“Fun? Seeing dead people? You have a weird definition of fun.”

Matt came back into the room, with his dog Snuffles on a leash. “My mom says we can go out but I have to take Snuffles with us.”

The three bundled up again and stepped out into the cold afternoon air, and Matt looked at his portable computing device. “This way,” he pointed.

The group walked for about twenty minutes, and they came to the place Matt was obviously talking about, because they stopped to stare at something.

I started scanning the area but found nothing, though they obviously believed something was there. Matt cautiously approached the area and looked up. “Are you all right?” he asked the empty air. He seemed to listen to a reply then motioned the others to get closer. “I don’t think he’s dangerous,” he said. They moved closer, all looking up at what must be a taller individual. From the height of their stares I could tell where the “ghost” was with triangulation, and ran a deep scan of the area. Nothing. This was getting me nowhere.

“Can we help you in some way?” asked Dee.

“Waiting for who, your parents?” asked Liz after a moment.

Sam swished his hand through the area where the “ghost’s” body would be, and the others looked shocked.

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"You're dead you know, you have to move on. You can't just wait here for all eternity!" Dee said, exasperated.

Okay, this is annoying, I thought. How come they can see it and I can't? Are they sharing some kind of group hallucination?

"Isn't there anything we can do?" asked Dee.

"Unless one of us spontaneously manifests the power to make ghosts move on, I don't think so," replied Liz.

"Wait, Terathel says Sam has that power, actually!" Matt said, brightly.

Sam just shrugged. "That's great and all, but how do I use it?"

"Maybe we could do it the old fashioned way?" Liz hedged.

"I didn't know there was a new fashioned way," muttered Dee.

"He's waiting for someone to come get him. He's stuck here, right?"

The others nod.

"We know his name, it's on the monument. Let's see if his parents still live around here and go get them. We can tell them to come by and just tell their son it's time for him to move on, and not to wait anymore. That should make him move on, right? Hearing it from them?"

"What exactly do we tell them to get them come do that though?" asked Matt.

"I was just thinking... the truth? That we 'feel' his spirit is lingering here and needs to be told to move on!"

"They'd never buy it," said Sam.

"We could try."

"Okay, okay, here's what we'll do," explained Matt. "We'll wait a few days. He's been here a year if this is right, so a few days won't hurt, right?" He pointed to the date on the monument.

"I guess," said Liz.

"We got weird powers, right? I mean this earthquake thing alone someone is going to have to look into. Someone with *powers*. We just ask them what to do. Now if no one shows up, fine, we'll try it your way Liz. At least then they'll have heard about the weird stuff at the school and everything and be more inclined to believe us."

They all thought for a second, looking at each other. Finally Elizabeth shrugged.

"If there are other people with powers in the world. We could all be the first, you know? Just so long as we do something before, like a week has passed. He doesn't look cold or anything but if he could be enjoying Heaven or whatever instead of just standing here..."

“What if he’s destined for, you know, Hell?” asked Dee.

“Then he probably deserved it,” said Elizabeth with finality.

“Sure...”

Define these terms, “Heaven” and “Hell,” I thought to my armor. Again, my armor informed me that only local definitions were available. Ah, yes, that would tie in with the ghost belief. Only they do seem to be taking it pretty seriously. I looked into it further. And this “Heaven” place is where “angels” are supposed to come from, which would also tie in. I wonder, could these beings actually have an... no, that’s not possible.

The four (plus dog) headed back, and re-entered the house where Matt lived.

“Hey, that earthquake is back!” said Matt’s father, after greeting everyone.

“Back?” asked Liz.

“Yeah, it stopped. About the time you kids left, actually. Funny thing, that. Now you came back, and here it is again. Weird. I’m calling the gas company.” He left the room.

Liz looked around nervously. “Um, you don’t think...”

“You are the only one with a power the angel couldn’t identify,” said Sam.

“And you have to admit it’s pretty coincidental,” said Dee.

“Text your mom and ask if it’s still going on at your place,” suggested Matt.

She used her handheld computer and communicated with her mother, who verified the quake had left the area.

“It’s me, isn’t it? That’s my super power? Making earthquakes? What good does that do me?”

“Actually,” said Matt, “Terathel has been trying to feel us all out a little more in an effort to be helpful, and says both you and Sam have a lot of spiritual energy, whatever that means. But he’s pretty sure he’s narrowed it down to yours, uh, leaking, that is causing this tremor. I guess maybe you have Earth based powers?”

“I did dream about an ant, so that could stand to reason, actually. And it’s great knowing that and everything, but what do I do about it? How do I, and I can’t believe I’m going to say this, plug the leak?”

“He says there is a technique you can learn to rein in your power. He can teach it to me and I can teach it to you.”

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“That would be great! Thank you Terathel. Can he hear me? I suppose he would have to, sorry, dumb question.”

“He says it’s no problem.”

The four went back to Matt’s room and he explained what his angel told him to do.

The three looked skeptical, but they passed the rest of the afternoon trying things until it was time for Liz to go home.

“I’ll keep working on it,” promised Matt. “At school tomorrow maybe we can get together at lunch and I’ll see if I can be clearer about it. Then you can practice.”

“Anything to stop this infernal shaking.”

“Infernal, that’s a good word,” remarked Dee.

“Thanks. About school, think we could get there early?”

“Why?” asked Matt.

“Have a look around. We got these powers or whatever there, I want to see if there’s something that can explain all this. And maybe those people that went missing became ghosts or something, and we can at least see them and explain.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll see if my Mom can drive us there early.”

“We could meet someplace in the middle of where we live and she could swing by and pick us up.”

“I’ll ask.”

“See you all then. If I don’t get shaken apart first...”

Back to School

Back in the classroom, open your books.

I monitored Elizabeth a little more closely that night, but she didn't seem to have dreams any more vivid than normal, and she was soon up and getting ready for school. She met with her three other friends and as they approached the building, my armor told me there was a vibrational anomaly some distance above me. They seemed to see it too, and looking up we all saw a female standing on the roof looking down at the group. I expected the two would meet soon enough so I stuck with Liz, and she suggested a quick look around the place and then meeting somewhere inside. The others agreed, and each headed off in a different direction. Liz poked her head into some classrooms, and down corridors and into sanitation rooms but didn't seem to find anything she thought was out of the ordinary. She met back up with the others.

"Anything?" asked Sam.

They all shook their heads.

"I know how to get to the roof, let's see if that woman is still up there," said Sam.

"Won't it be locked though?" asked Dee.

"She got up there, didn't she?"

I had to ask myself if it was bravado, ignorance, or just plain foolishness to actively seek out someone who might be extremely hostile towards them. The thought didn't even seem to cross their minds that the female might be dangerous, but walked through the halls without concern. If the female did have something to do with this, I could imagine her not being pleased with the interruption of four kids showing up. They were, after all, completely helpless at the moment.

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The group made their way to the staircase, following Sam's direction, and found the door to be unlocked. They climbed the stairs and pushed the door to the roof open, stepping out. The gravel covering the roof started to vibrate more as Liz approached it.

"You know, you really can get used to anything," Liz remarked. "I hardly feel this stupid quaking anymore."

"Did you see that?" asked Matt, pointing.

"See what?" asked Sam.

"Come on, I think she went over here," said Matt, walking across the roof.

"Should we really be up here?" asked Dee. "We could get in trouble!"

"We could also find out what made us all like this, and that's worth getting in trouble. Come on," said Liz. "Besides, if I can't think of a prank to pull now that I'm up here I'm not worth the title of prankster."

"Do you have that title?" Dee asked uncertainly.

"Didn't you see me spiking the punch at the dance?"

"You didn't?!"

Liz's reply was lost as Matt rounded the corner on the stairwell cover and found the woman hiding behind it. "Ah hah!" he shouted. "Up here destroying evidence or something?"

"I was about to say the same thing to you," the woman replied. "What are you four doing up here?" Looking over the woman she seemed dressed as oddly as those other "spirit hunters" so I figured she probably was one herself. She had on a big floppy hat and a covering I had heard called a "poncho." Whatever that meant. She was quite attractive, I thought, at least as I had been judging standards of beauty on this planet.

"We're trying to figure out what's happening to us, and Terathel said something about a pentagram up here and then when we came to school early we found you up here!"

"Slow down, cowboy," said the figure, holding up a hand. "The who said what now? And something happened to you kids?"

"Yes. Two nights ago something weird happened here and after that stuff started blowing up or shaking or making people disappear around town. Terathel is my guardian angel and he said when he was sucked down from Heaven he saw a symbol on the roof."

"Wait, are you saying that two nights ago you spontaneously became a petitioner?"

Matt cocked his head. "Terathel says yes, that's the name people give what I can do."

The woman squinted at him. “And judging from the eyes, a cambion as well?”

“You would know better than I would.”

She continued looking us over. “Plenty of spirit energy there, and one of you seems to be radiating it quite strongly.”

Liz shyly raised her hand.

“I felt you coming a ways away. Can you tone it down a little?”

“You think I like shaking everything up?”

“Ah, no, right. So I guess you're as in the dark as anyone huh?”

They all nodded.

“Great. A bunch of untrained kids running around. Are there more of you?”

“We all knew each other before this happened, but if whatever it was hit people at random, and we were randomly picked and just happened to be friends? I mean what are the odds of that?” asked Matt.

“You're right, there's probably more. Great. Tell me what you know and we'll look for this symbol of yours and take it from there.”

So the group explained what they've been doing, and about the “ghost” they visited, which perked up the spirit hunter's interest. She introduced herself as Rosalita, and told them she was assigned to check this area out, because a large spiritual presence was felt here on the night of the dance. It was almost time for them to get to class, so they made arrangements to meet after school and went back down the stairs.

Once the school started filling up, everyone was talking about the strange weekend and why this strange tremor was moving about the area. Liz's face got red when she heard people talking about that and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes awhile after that. There was one good piece of news, however, as Liz discovered one of the missing students in her homeroom.

As she walked into the room she noticed the girl I had seen earlier, the one with the wings, slumped in a chair and crying. She rushed over.

“Hey, are you okay?” she whispered.

“You can see me?” said the girl, her eyes widening. “Oh thank God, I thought I was stuck wondering the Earth invisible forever!”

“Look, I can't talk now,” said Liz, totally oblivious to the fact that no one was paying attention to her anyway, “but you're going to be fine. Something happened at the dance and made a bunch of us- made something happen to a bunch of us. You feel that earthquake? That's me.”

“Wow, I thought I had problems.”

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Liz nodded. “But we found someone who’s here to check things out, and we’re meeting her after school. Come to room 201 and bring anyone who can see you, or seems to be invisible like you, okay?”

She brightened. “There’s three of us that I know of. We’ve just been stuck here when our parents couldn’t see us after the dance. We broke into the cafeteria to eat. Anyway, I’ll come. Can I meet you at lunch too? I never realized how much I missed just talking to people.”

“Okay.”

The bell rang and school started, so Liz went to sit down, and the winged girl seemed to be in better spirits. I was glad; in all the excitement surrounding Liz and her friends I had not checked in with these others, a definite lapse on my part. Not that I could have done anything anyway, but still.

There was an announcement that two students had died in fires over the weekend, and counseling services would be made available to those who wanted them. People looked a bit shocked to learn this, but I was more suspicious than anything. This area had pretty good fire control personnel, and two people dying in fires in two days stretched credibility.

That afternoon at lunch the group got back together and were joined by four others now vibrationally separate from the rest of the universe. After sitting down, I was amused to note that even though the room was quite full, no one tried to take the “empty” seats. I again wondered how something that was invisible to others can be so ignored at the same time. Wouldn’t someone try sitting there, causing problems?

They all wanted to be reassured they could be seen, which I found reasonable given the circumstances. One, a male, I noticed was dressed differently and had a sword, so he had obviously become a spirit hunter. The group explained what they knew of the situation as they ate, each sharing something with the new arrivals.

“Now one thing Terathel says is that the power to be unnoticed is actually pretty rare outside of people who are spirit hunters. He also says the powers we’ve got are sort of randomized, like someone just hit a big old scramble button in the sky. Yes yes, they know you didn’t say it like that, I’m paraphrasing. What else?” He paused. “Right, very few people that are born every year actually get access to powers like ours. Like this year, two hundred people total might discover they have them. To have eight of us that we know of from one school is just not possible naturally. So something happened that night of the dance to make us this way.”

“So you're saying,” said the guy with the horns, “That because this was done to us, there may be some way to reverse it!”

“I'm saying it's possible,” Matt hedged. “Come see us after school and we'll talk to the spirit hunter and see what she says.”

“Wait, I just had a thought!” said Liz. “What if we're not the only school this has happened to? Check the news, see if other areas are having bizarre things happen to them!”

Portable computers came out and everyone spent a few minutes typing into them. One by one they shook their heads. “I've found nothing,” was the general finding.

“I found a conspiracy blog about some school out in the middle of the ocean training an army of people with powers...” said Sam.

They looked at each other a second.

“Nahh,” they all said, and he put his phone back.

“Still, at least now we know we aren't the only ones in the world with powers. If a couple hundred people are born every year, they must be around someplace. We just have to find them. Before we even think about that, can you give me the short version of how to stop everything shaking?” asked Liz.

“I did manage to pick up the basics,” replied Matt. “What you have to do is...”

I was intrigued. The technique seemed easy enough, and quite useful. Not only would it allow her to stop her power from causing trouble in the world, it would let her put forth more effort if she needed to do something strenuous, like lifting something heavy. I hadn't been taught a new technique in some time, which I supposed was a bad sign. Rely too much on my armor, one day it'll come back to trouble me, I was sure. I started practicing the technique myself.

Elizabeth seemed distracted the entire rest of the day, probably trying to work out how to put what Matt had said to good use. Finally the last bell rang and she raced off to room 201 to meet the spirit hunter.

“Oh, they found you. Great!” said Liz as she came into the room. Rosalita was already there and so were the three with the vibrational difference. So were Sam and Matt, who she greeted warmly.

“Should I be expecting any more people? This isn't a new club you know.”

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“Oh, excuse me for your being the first person we've met who can tell us anything about what's happening to us! I suppose you grew up knowing you had powers and there was a nice ceremony and everything, but it was a little different for us!”

“I know, I'm sorry. I don't mean to take it out on you, it's just been impossible to tell anything so I have no idea what's going on myself. It's making me cranky. Come on in, there's plenty of room,” she said to the kid carrying his own body into the room.

“I was avoiding people before I realized it didn't matter. Someone walked right past me and didn't even blink, so... can you get me back together again?”

“Yeah, that's easy. Just lay your body down right here.”

He did.

“Now just jump into it.”

“Do what?”

Rosalita rolled her eyes and grabbed the kid's head, smashing it into his body, where it disappeared. The body opened its eyes.

“Oh, like that! Hey I'm really hungry!”

She shook her head. “Anyway, still trying to shake the place down, huh?”

“I've had all of three hours to practice, should I have mastered the technique by now? Oh, and I was supposed to be paying attention in class during that time, which I suppose means nothing to you.”

She looked down. “No, the technique is generally taught over a period of months, and usually before it gets this bad.” She looked around. “I don't know what we're going to do about your problem.”

“Luckily it doesn't have to become your problem,” said a new voice by the door, and a man I had never seen walked through it. “Because the experts have arrived.”

They all looked over at the man that had entered. He had dark hair and was wearing a covering with buttons down the front of it. Sort of like a cross between a military uniform and a priest's habit. He seemed to radiate confidence, and looked around the room.

As he did I performed a quick scan, noting with some trepidation he didn't scan as completely human. My armor noted his inner energy patterns were different from the others, but I shrugged it off, thinking perhaps he had “talismans” or other active powers about his person. I didn't yet know enough about what was possible, or how common such things were, to be able to say if these readings were suspicious or not. *And if they are, what exactly can I do about them?*

“Quite the collection of powers here, interesting, interesting. My name’s Derren, I’m here with a bunch of other people to help sort this whole mess out.”

“You’re with... them?” asked Rosalita.

“That’s right.”

Wait, who’s them, I thought to myself. But she just nodded.

“I guess that’s it for me then. Don’t worry, you should be in good hands.”

“You’re leaving?” asked Sam.

“Don’t worry, their group can teach you better than I can. And I’m getting hungry myself, you know? I need to get back to my body and now that I know you’ll be looked after, it’s not really my problem.”

“She has a point,” said Matt. “Thanks for sticking around, we appreciate it.”

“No problem. Hope you make it.” She turned around and started waving her hands around, chanting in a low voice. As I expected, she teleported away, and I noticed Liz taking an active interest. A second later she looked puzzled, then shook her head and turned back to Derren.

“What did she mean by that?” asked Matt.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it. Spirit hunters are all doom and gloom, mostly. Good fighters, don’t get me wrong, but with a slightly skewed perspective. Anyway, enough about her. I’m from a group that calls itself Zephyr, why don’t you all introduce yourselves and we can get this all sorted out?”

As they did, Sam took out his computing device and tapped away for a second.

“Gentle Breeze?”

“Hey, I didn’t come up with the name.”

“Right.”

“So you are Zephyr? That doesn’t tell us anything,” Liz protested.

“Right you are. We’re a group that helps those control their powers. There are larger, more organized groups of course, but we handle the tough cases. And looking around this room, I can see plenty of tough cases. Who’s the one with the shake, rattle and roll anyway?”

Liz reluctantly put up a hand.

“Turn around and lift your shirt up,” said Derren, taking out a small piece of dead plant pulp... sorry, paper, in the local language.

“What?” said Liz, obviously shocked, and crossing her arms over her chest.

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“This is called a ward, it’ll suppress your power until you take it off. So the best place for it is on your back.”

“Oh,” she replied, the capillaries in her face expanding and giving her a reddish hue. She turned around and Derren slapped it on, where it stuck. I started a scan and watched as the power leakage slowed and then stopped. Amazing.

“Wow, that’s... thanks!”

“I’ll give you another in case you want to shower tonight, and we’ll come up with a more permanent solution later. But that’ll work for now.”

“I’ve been told the theory of doing it naturally. Matt’s angel taught it to him.”

“Taking the initiative, I like that! Anyway, as you’re closer to the problem let’s hear what you’ve been through and I can fill you in on what we’ve learned about the situation.”

So the group explained what they had been through and Derren seemed pretty impressed.

“Wow, kids today sure are capable. I’m impressed. Of course having an angel in the group didn’t hurt I’m sure. Well, there are a few things you haven’t thought of that we’ve looked into. One of which is, did you know only kids at the dance were changed, but not adults?”

“I didn’t even consider that!” said Liz. “There were teachers there, and chaperones, and the DJ and everything. So why only us kids?”

Derren shook his head. “We have no idea. A sort of blanket event like this should do what it’s doing equally without regards to age, but that doesn’t seem to be the case. Was it targeted at you? Did it only change those who have younger souls? We don’t know.”

“Can’t be- Sam here is the reincarnation of Samson, so he would have the oldest soul of us all.”

“I see. I wonder if that’s how it works? Anyway, good to know.”

“Please, this is all very interesting, but can we be made normal again?” pleaded the girl with the wings.

“Quite the shock you three have had, no doubt. Let’s do this- none of you are in immediate danger so let me go see what my group can do for these three. We can get together separately tomorrow after school and figure out what sort of training each one of you needs. How does that sound?”

The others agreed that would be best, it was obvious even to me how much stress the vibrationally separate people were under.

“I just have one other question,” Liz asked. “It seems to me this was deliberate, yes?”

“Nothing like it has happened before, if that’s what you mean. People are born with powers or not, though there are the lucky few that get them later in life. But nothing on this scale, and not without something really traumatic happening to them. Why do you ask?”

“Then someone or something did this to us. Why? Some sort of sick experiment? To create an army of super soldiers? Just for laughs? What purpose does it serve someone, having a bunch of kids suddenly gain powers they don’t understand?”

“I wish I knew. All we can do is deal with the situation we’re in and keep an eye out for it happening again somewhere.”

“Okay. I guess even people with powers don’t know everything.”

He chuckled. “You’ll find we only know more about how little we know.”

So he left, and took the other three with him after giving Elizabeth another “ward.” He told her to activate it, just imagine power flowing out through her body and into it while sticking it to herself. When she got it right it would stay there, and of course the earthquake would stop. She said she would give it a try, but her body language seemed to say “I’ll believe it’s that easy when I see it.” I was getting better at reading that, at least.

That evening Elizabeth raced through her “homework” and sat in her room, concentrating. She had taken off the first “ward” and was now trying to gauge how effective her efforts were. Often she would use her portable computer to ask Matt about a point or two of how to reign in her power. She was doing well, considering, which didn’t surprise me given how strongly she wanted her local environment to stop trembling. However, I quickly realized the technique had a flaw. Specifically: she would lose it during her dormancy period. I stood there watching her as the hours went past and she became more and more frustrated. She would concentrate and her power would stop flowing out. Then she would start to fall asleep and her control would slip, making everything shake again and waking her up. She was beginning to despair when I decided a little cheating was in order. I could tell from her study of the technique and my own experimentation with it that ultimately she would be able to maintain it even unconsciously. That would take a tremendous familiarity with the technique and more practice than she had time for.

So I helped her out a little bit.

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I would call it microsurgery, basically rewiring a portion of her brain to approximate the state it would be in with that level of practice. Obviously my armor systems took care of the actual practical side, I just explained what I wanted to happen and my armor was able to make the necessary adjustments to her neuron structure. I stuck my hand, phased as it was out of their reality, into her head and allowed microscopic armor filaments to electrically and chemically stimulate the proper pathways. I carried the procedure out just as she was entering her dormancy for the fourth time that night, and it took right away. I expected she may have had some strange dreams as her brain suddenly found itself in a slightly different configuration, but the next morning she sleepily stumbled out of bed and looked around. No shaking. She considered, looking off into space. Then she smiled, and a laugh burst forth from her mouth as she started moving in a strange way.

For a horrified moment I thought maybe the procedure had gone wrong somehow and I had injured her brain, but she then went about her daily routine and seemed fine. I guess she was just expressing her happiness at “mastering” the technique? She would never know it wasn’t totally her own effort, but that was fine with me. I just wanted her to move on, which I knew she wouldn’t be able to do unless she had her power under control. Now that it was I could see what else she was capable of, my main purpose in selecting her to observe.

Grim Tidings

“I got the blues, so bad, kinda wish I was dead.” --Weird Al

Sadly her excitement was short lived, as almost immediately upon arriving at school she received the worst possible news she probably ever had in her brief existence. All the young humans were directed to the auditorium, where grim faced teachers awaited everyone’s arrival. There was a strange feeling in the air, and I got the sense from the young humans that this was somehow very out of the ordinary. Sam, Matt and Elizabeth got together and were looking for their friend Dee, and started to get very worried when she was nowhere to be found. The three young humans from the day before were there, and I was able to notice “wards” on their bodies. Apparently this was allowing them to be seen as normal and forcing their vibrational pattern back into sync with the rest of the universe. Would that I could have done the same so easily! They thanked the others for what they had done and said they were much more at ease with their transformation now that they knew many others over the years had gone through similar situations and been fine. Slowly the room filled and everyone quieted down.

I watched as the “ruler” of the school, the “principal,” walked out onto the stage. I thought he looked particularly grim and wondered if I wasn’t misreading his facial features. I noticed Liz looking similar to a degree and began to dread what he was about to say.

“I’m sorry to have called you all here like this,” he began, “but circumstances have forced it. You may have noticed certain people missing this morning, which is what this is all about. There’s no easy way to say this, and I am so, so sorry to have to be the one to tell you. Normally we

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would do this very differently, but after what's happened... I just, I don't know how to..."

What sort of thing is he about to tell them? I looked around, the emotional energy of the room was almost physical. He took a deep breath.

"Between school ending yesterday and starting this morning, eight students have been found-"

A figure ran over to the principal and whispered something to him.

"Oh God, not- nine. Nine students have been found... dead."

Gasps and cries erupted through the auditorium.

"Please, I know... it's going to be hard."

"Dee!" shouted Liz, water streaming down her cheeks. "Dee? Are you here? Where are you?" Others were shouting similarly.

"Quiet, please! I'll bring up a list of the names..." He walked to a light throwing device and added a name, then turned it on. Nine names flashed up behind him, and among them was "Meredith"- or "Dee" as she was known by her friends.

I was stunned. How had this happened? My sensors had not alerted me to any energy discharges or vibrational disturbances that would have meant doors to that strange world had opened. How could that many humans, all from this small school, have died so closely together in time? It was beyond belief. Was this power they had gained some sort of new sickness? Burning their vitality in days what would have lasted them years?

Make no mistake- I had ravaged entire star systems to keep those beings who would bring only darkness with them from spreading further. I regretted the necessity, but that didn't keep me from performing my duty. I had watched worlds burn, and felt little more than a sense of things being made right. Oh, I was meticulous. I once watched a species for two hundred and fifty of its local years to make sure I was doing the right thing before I destroyed every single one of them. But destroy them I did. But this- these nine tiny lives seem to cry out to me- "Find who did this! Punish them! Please! It wasn't our time."

Meanwhile, the principal was trying to get everyone calmed down enough to continue.

"Please, if I could just have your attention for a little while longer!"

Obviously he was being ignored.

“You!” shouted Liz, lunging over and grabbing Matt’s shirt. Water continued streaming down her cheeks, a curious reaction to grief, I thought. “Angel! What the heck? You said she had holy powers! She said Jesus loved her! Is this how Heaven shows support to those who can use holy power? Huh? Answer me! Why did she have to die?”

“He says,” began Matt, “He says this wasn’t Heaven’s doing. Even if something... activated this ability in them... they would still have to be worthy to channel the power. Heaven wouldn’t... kill anyone, especially like this. He’s very insistent. He says he’s very sorry for your loss, and together maybe... we can get to the bottom of this.”

Elizabeth seemed to relax a little.

“I should be on that list.” Matt looked even more shocked now than before.

“What?”

“This morning. A car almost hit me but I had stepped out of the way just in time. I didn’t think anything of it, but it makes sense.”

“Nothing about this makes sense. I want a better explanation from you later, angel.”

I want a better explanation myself.

Eventually the principal made it known that classes were canceled for the rest of the week, and “services” would be held soon. Also, additional councilors would be brought in for those that had lost people close to them and wanted to talk. Everyone seemed to be only half awake as they shambled back to their classrooms to await parents being called and busses returning. Elizabeth just sat dejectedly and wouldn’t talk to anyone.

I, on the other hand, saw that Matt was dealing with his emotions in a different way: looking into the deaths. I followed him. I left a phased probe watching Elizabeth in case she moved, and went after him. By a stroke of luck, he found Derren half-heartedly examining a wall in an unused classroom. Derren seemed surprised to see him, if I was reading his expressions right.

“So you’ve heard then,” he said sadly.

“What’s going on around here?”

Derren shook his head. “I wish we knew. We got the information on how they all died, of course, but it boggles the mind. It really does. Our seers didn’t predict this.”

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“Predict what? How exactly did all these people...”

“Accidents. Seemingly random accidents, one right after the other. Routine activities gone wrong, I mean one person choked to death on their breakfast for Pete’s sake. It’s not normal, even for us.”

“What could cause something so widespread like that? The dance thing I can understand, we were all in the same room. But this, all over town? What has that kind of power?”

“I hate to say it again, but nothing we know of. Did anything strange happen to you lately?”

“I did almost get hit by a car on the way to school, why?”

“That’s the oddest thing about it. The only people that died were people like yourself, chosen to use holy power.”

“So it is some sort of conspiracy!”

“It’s some sort of something. It all centers here but we’ve had people working on it night and day since it happened and nothing.”

Could something on this world be influencing probability itself? I thought to myself. Something that didn’t want a certain type of ability to manifest? So it took what it could get, then killed off the rest? I had looked into “Angel” and “Devil” and “Heaven” and “Hell” which was all very interesting, but I had discounted those concepts as just a remnant of a more primitive time. That thing surrounding Matt, I believed, was just a manifestation like the ant that Elizabeth believed was tied to her power. But what if I was wrong? Could these beings actually exist here? It would certainly be interesting to meet someone who could command power like I did. Perhaps they could give me some insights as to my origin?

“Is there anything we can do?”

“We as in you guys who got powers a couple of days ago? No. Leave it to the professionals. We’ll figure it out somehow. You just focus on learning about your abilities and calling angels. We might need your power sooner rather than later if holy people are being targeted.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“And be careful. Just because you escaped once doesn’t mean you’re in the clear.”

Matt nodded.

Wait, he could “call” angels? Following Elizabeth around caused me to miss certain things. Was he like that person that got killed by spirit hunters? Could he create predators, as I continued to call them, out of

nothing? I could put a probe on him... I decided I would learn what Elizabeth learned, I was sure everything would be said to her eventually.

It took a couple of hours, in which most of the young humans were uncommunicative, but eventually the busses pulled back up to take the humans home. Even the news that school was canceled the rest of the week hardly raised their spirits. I wondered if this was the “Zephyr” group’s doing, to empty the school and search for any traces of what happened the night I was drawn here. Matt was walking to his bus, and I was high above, thinking about things and waiting for Elizabeth to board hers. He suddenly went down, sliding on ice, though everyone else had walked there perfectly fine. He was trying to steady himself and just got closer and closer to where the busses were parked. Looking through the roof of the vehicle I saw the driver’s foot slip off the brake and onto the acceleration pedal!

I stepped “left” and froze the scene, wondering if I should do anything. I approached the vehicle and saw that, yes, it would impact Matt with enough force to destroy his body. I was torn- I hadn’t yet decided to throw my full support behind this planet, but at the same time, I felt Elizabeth had gone through enough tragedy for one day. Perhaps a little more “cheating” was in order? But how best to accomplish it...

I sent a thin beam from my finger into the rubber support circles the bus frame rested on, shredding them all on one side. Of course the beam was generated by my armor, not my finger. I then gave the bus a nudge, and stepped “right” again, watching with pleasure as the bus narrowly missed Matt and ground to a halt. Matt was frozen in shock, and everyone ran over to see if he was all right, which he was. *Take that, weird probability changing force!* I thought smugly. *You won’t take another victim today if I’m around.* I stuck a probe with him just to be on the safe side, and Sam volunteered to watch out for him the rest of the day. Elizabeth, who had run out as he fell, thanked him, hugged Matt, and got on her bus as directed.

That evening I had to save Matt twice more, while somehow his own luck intervened several times on his behalf, so I didn’t need to. The last thing was an actual lightning bolt, in the midst of winter, which I didn’t even think was possible. My probe felt the potential build up and I willed myself there to deflect the energy harmlessly away from Matt’s home. After that things calmed down and he went into his dormancy period.

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I learned the next day that the school was still “open” so that young humans not yet trusted to remain alone in their homes had a place to go. Elizabeth expressed a desire to return, probably to speak with Derren who would no doubt be there, than because of any mistrust on her mother’s part. Also I think she decided it wouldn’t do her any good to sit around the house alone, moping. There seemed to be a new determination in her eyes, like perhaps she had thought her life was going to go one way, but the death of her friend forced her to go another. While she was waiting outside, however, Derren pulled up in a car to talk to her.

“Good morning, Liz! I don’t feel any shaking, you really took to that power suppression technique, didn’t you?”

“I stayed up half the night trying to master it, then somehow something just clicked.”

Yeah, me, I thought. You’re welcome.

“Great, that’s just great. I have some good news for you, I’m sure you can use it.”

“Could I ever.”

“I’ve been assigned to help you start learning powers, and we can start today if you’d like. Our seers think they’ve got your abilities figured out, so I can tell you about them and get you started.”

“That would be great!”

“Where would you like to go?”

“Uh, well, my Mom’s gone and I don’t know how I would explain a strange man in her house if she came back unexpectedly. If it’s all the same to you, can I just meet you at the school someplace?”

“Stranger danger, huh? I’m not offended, it’s the smart thing to do.”

“Especially when the man offering to take you someplace has powers unknown.”

“We’ll do it your way, no pressure. Take the bus and I’ll see you at school.”

“Thanks... for understanding.”

It’s a pity young humans have to worry about that kind of thing from their older counterparts, I thought, sliding a mental bead into the “don’t help the humans” side of the imaginary scale I was carrying in my head.

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8

Schools within Schools

Wheels within wheels

After arriving the two got together in an empty classroom, which I wasn't sure was that much of an improvement, but at least help was within shouting distance. They both sat down.

Wait a minute, I thought, looking around. She's getting one on one training with him? Wouldn't it be more efficient to have everyone with similar abilities in one place, so the material would not have to be repeated again and again? There was always the possibility she was unique in some way, or her (until recently) uncontrolled power was more special than I thought. Or maybe she's the only one of her type to come to school today?

“So our seers tell me you have three separate powers, quite the mix, actually. It's like someone took a big blender and just stirred you guys all up with every power available on Earth. Your friend Matt is both partly demon now and supposedly a caller of holy energies. We weren't even sure that was possible so he might be something else entirely, we're still checking into it.”

“What's a seer?”

“Oh boy, I forget you're awful new to this, aren't you? A seer is just the name we give to someone who has a specific set of mental powers revolving around sight. They can see when people are lying, pierce illusions, see the future or even long distances away. They can also intuit an answer to a question, so we've been working our way through the school to find out what everyone can do. Which brings us back to you.”

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“Hit me.”

Derren smiled. “You got it. You're a shaman, a spirit energist, and somehow, a copycat master. There's a few extra bits sprinkled in for good measure we'll get to shortly. Where would you like me to start?”

“Um, the last one?”

“You got it. You haven't actually seen any supernatural abilities performed, have you?”

“I don't think so. Wait, no, that one lady teleported away, and I did feel something weird when she did.”

“Okay, let's try this one on for size. Stand up.”

They both did.

“Now, I'm going to do something. Watch me carefully, and do exactly what I do. But don't just watch, also feel what I'm doing and let the same kind of power flow through you, okay?”

Elizabeth made a weird shoulder gesture. “If you say so.”

“That's the spirit. Now, on three, okay? One. Two. Three!”

Derren took a step like he was climbing up a set of stairs, but instead of setting his foot down, he drew the other one up and stood on air. Elizabeth mimicked his movements exactly and found herself standing on air as well.

“What- what am I doing? How did I do that?”

“Great job! How did that feel?”

“Weird. Like I could grab onto the power you just used and use it myself. I'm standing on air, this is crazy!”

“It's something you can learn to do on your own, for now, just step down.”

She did so.

“Okay, now try to do it again.”

Her eyes got a little unfocused and she tried to step onto the air again, but brought her foot down.

“I can't remember how I did it.”

Derren nodded. “That's to be expected- it's what being a copycat master means. Basically you have photographic reflexes... for powers. If you see something done you can copy it, as easily as that. Take your friend Matt again, for example. He petitions an angel, right? If that's what he can learn to do, but assume for the moment it is. If you copy his movements and power exactly you'll get that same type of angel. You aren't a petitioner though, so you can't keep one around with spiritual energy like they can. It would fade in a couple of minutes. But I think you'll come to appreciate the ability.”

“Can we try something else?”

“Sure! Here’s another one you’ll be able to do on your own. Ready?”

She nodded excitedly.

A semi-transparent dome of energy shimmered to life around Derren, and a similar one appeared right underneath it.

“That’s exactly it. Great job! This is a barrier, by the way, one of the things a spirit energist can do.”

“Wow, it’s pretty,” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“I guess it is, at that.” They both winked out.

“Now, why is being a copycat master so special, you might ask. Well, the answer touches on why people don’t usually manifest powers like you kids did. Usually they are passed down through families. Oh, there’s the odd exception of course, but the majority of people with powers can trace their ancestors having powers far back in time. But certain powers are special- spirit energists like you and me are pretty common. It’s a well understood power that has been studied for many generations. So we know pretty much what a spirit energist can do, because they can all do pretty much the same thing. But some families have abilities only they can do, and being a copycat master is one of those family things.”

“Oh.”

“Like I said, big blender. That’s really all you need to know about being a copycat master. Just look at a power being performed, feel it out, and you can duplicate it. You have to get it right away though, hesitate more than a second or two and you’ll lose it. Oh, and it isn’t guaranteed, because the power may be too much for you to handle, as you are basically stealing it. Like with the petitioning I talked about earlier. They can put extra energy into a ritual to get an angel- you can’t. You have to take what you can get. Or you could feel it out wrong. Or the person you’re copying can’t actually do what they’re trying- what I’m saying is don’t get discouraged if it doesn’t always work. There may be other subtleties to the power you’ll have to explore yourself. There aren’t too many copycat masters in the world, and they’re reluctant to talk about their powers in case it reveals a weakness in the technique.”

“Still seems worth it.”

“Absolutely. Now, let’s talk about the first one I mentioned.”

“Being a shaman?”

“Right. Basically only someone very close to nature, and what you might call 'of a primitive belief system' becomes a shaman. Now they have two major powers. The first, to talk to the spirits. You can learn rituals

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which relate to a certain animal, the spirit of which will grant you an ability related to its nature. The spirit of the buffalo, for example, will make you extra tough. The spirit of the butterfly will let you change your shape. That sort of thing. We're tracking down a book of them for you so you can practice them later. For now I'd like to try calling out your spirit guardian. That's the second of your major abilities, to call an animal spirit that basically matches your personality and can fight on your behalf."

"An ant?"

"What makes you say that?"

"I had a dream about an ant the night of the dance."

"And anything else?"

"I... I don't know."

Did she block it out after she woke up? I wondered. I had been drinking in all this information, and this ability of hers to mimic other powers—extraordinary. How far could she take it? I wondered, could she even somehow copy my armor's abilities? And if so, what would that mean?

"Okay. It was a dream, after all. You thought of an ant first, let's try that. Close your eyes and relax. Take a deep breath, and feel inside yourself. There's a part of your soul that will come when you call it, a part that wants to keep you safe. The official name we give it is spirit projection. Call to it now. Envision the ant you saw in your dream, and give it the spirit power it needs to come into our world. You can do it, just take it slow. You can't force it, you have to convince it."

"Power buildup in local area," my armor suddenly said to me.

"From the female?" I asked, sweeping a scan over her.

"Negative, from the male."

"What?"

I watched, and while Derren seemed to be at ease, talking her through the procedure, his energy was building up inside his body. *Now what could he be up-*

Suddenly a vague form started to take shape next to Elizabeth, but it wasn't the ant I had seen in her dream.

It was the fox.

Elizabeth gave a cry and seemed to mentally shove the creature away, which vanished, and she staggered over to the nearest chair and collapsed into it.

The power drained away from Derren.

“You okay?”

“What was that? That fox! I remember that now. It was trying to become real, pushing my ant out of the way. I could feel it, the horrible power it had.”

He sighed. “We were afraid of this. Your hair is sort of a dead giveaway to those in the know.”

“My what?”

“That stripe you have in the middle. You don’t dye it, do you?”

“No, it’s just always been white like that.”

“Exactly. You have a divided soul.”

“What does that mean?”

He sat down again. “Okay. First off, souls are real. A rock is different from a cat because the cat is alive. But you are different from a cat because you have a soul. This makes you self aware in a way the cat isn’t.”

First I’ve heard of it, I thought. And I’ve heard some pretty crazy theories about what life is from other planets.

“Now if you mistreat the gift of life, when you die, you go to the Demon World, right?”

“Are you talking about Hell?”

“Yup, it’s a real place. Pray you never have to see it. In any case, most that go there get turned into demons. Their soul becomes the body of a demon, and they start a new life doing whatever it is their type of demon does. Your soul is already part of the way there. It’s rare, but not as rare as you might think. Like you said, you had an odd physical feature that you couldn’t explain. A lot of people do. Some of those people have a soul that’s already partly demonic.”

“So I’m going to the Demon World when I die? For sure?”

“No, no, I don’t want you to get that impression. It’s just that half of your soul is already the type of demon you would become, *should* you go to the Demon World.”

Wait, are they talking about that weird other place I glimpsed when I first saw that spirit hunter fighting that predator? Could it have been this “demon” thing they’re talking about, and it went back to the “Demon World?”

“Now normally,” he continued, “this isn’t a problem. You live your life completely normally and your soul gets judged just like every other when you die. You, on the other hand, now have the ability to manifest part of your soul. You see where I’m going with this?”

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She nodded, her eyes haunted. “So every time I try to call out my... spirit projection, you called it? Every time I’m going to have to risk calling out this demon thing instead?”

“For now, yes. It can’t be removed, if that’s what you’re thinking. It will always be there, tempting you with what it can do. But let it out and it won’t be under your control, like the spirit projection would be. It will act like the demon it is.”

“Is there no way of controlling it?”

“There are two ways, actually. The first is to learn how to call your projection out without letting your other half know about it. So to speak. The second is to force it to merge with your spirit projection for a few seconds, if you’re in a really tight spot. But the two are basically opposites of each other, so they won’t allow that sort of meld for long.”

“Wait, so that merging can be beneficial?”

“Yes, because for that short time, your soul will be whole again. That will give the complete soul, which will look really, really weird, increased power. We’ve found the strongest people tend to have this happen. Almost as if they have so much power one ‘personality’ let’s call it, can’t handle it all. So it gets split off and becomes a force on its own.”

“Why would it look funny?”

“Because they get fused together physically. It would be a furry ant with nine tails or a fox with an exoskeleton and mandibles. Hard to say until we saw it.”

“Weird. So if I put the effort in, and manage it carefully, I can make it work for me, rather than against me?”

“It doesn’t see itself as working against you, exactly. Demons are creatures of habit, in a way. They pretty much all act the same way. In other words, if you’ve met one imp, to a certain extent you’ve met every imp. So it’s just going to follow its nature. It’s just that nature might not be what you want. Sometimes it might be- that’s the tricky part. To know when to allow something powerful out of yourself that isn’t under control. If it killed someone even though you told it no, I bet you’d feel pretty bad, right?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“So there you are. If you were alone and in danger, it would fight to protect you, because it knows without you, it couldn’t exist. And if you die without it taking you over, you go to Heaven, or at least migrate normally, and it dies for sure. Short of that...”

“I get it. It’s too dangerous to use any shaman powers then, until I get it under control. Too bad.”

“I wouldn’t say that. You could still learn to call spirits.”

“No, it’s too dangerous. What if it started influencing me without me realizing? Or interferes with my talking to spirits? I think it’s best just to focus on other things now. Like that spirit energist stuff you were doing before. You said I could learn to do that on my own, right?”

“Yes you could. But I must caution you- To begin to learn how to control it you must complete calling it out at least once. It still isn’t fully formed yet, and if what I’m feeling from you is right, you’ve blocked yourself psychologically from using any shaman powers at all. I still feel that potential inside you, but it’s muted now. Give yourself a little time and we’ll try it again. We’ll go out in the woods or something so there’s less chance of anyone being hurt if it runs wild. Once it’s fully manifested I can teach you a meditation exercise to let you speak to both your projection and this demonic form. Before the projection will fight for you a sort of “inner trial” will be conducted. Each one is different so I can’t give you too many specifics. But you’ll know it when you see it. After you complete that your projection will come when you call it and give you its power.”

“I’m afraid of that fox coming out though- you say it could run wild?”

“That’s probably why that power feels so muted now. You’re just going to have to convince yourself I can handle it if that happens. It’s a part of you; denying it is denying yourself. Like I said, over the next few days just keep in the back of your mind that it’s something you’re going to have to do sooner or later. And the sooner you do manifest it the first time, the sooner you can get it under control.”

“I guess you have a point. I’ll think about it.”

“Great. I’m sure you’ll work through this soon. On to spirit energist skills then? Let’s start with the most simple thing, manifesting your weapon.”

“I don’t want to hurt anyone!”

“Don’t worry, your weapon is a reflection of yourself. I think you’ll be surprised.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

Derren explained the procedure for manifesting a weapon, which seemed surprisingly easy, and Elizabeth found herself holding a strange looking object.

“What the heck is this?” she asked, looking at it.

“I didn’t expect that- let me see, it must have a name.”

He brought out his portable computing device and started typing into it. “Ah yes, it’s a Japanese kusarigama.”

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My visor flashed up the words “Chain-sickle” now that I had commanded it to only translate the local language auditorially but to provide a translation with text. This would prevent me from hearing things like people practicing another language and keep me from wondering why they kept repeating things to themselves.

“Apparently used by ninjas, so there’s that going for you.”

“But what is it?”

“Like most ninja “inventions” it’s a weapon and a tool. On one end is a heavy weight, which you can see here. Then this length of chain runs up to the handle here, which has a blade on the end. Very versatile, really. You can trip someone, wrap them up, tie them up, use it for climbing, or for cutting stuff. It’s probably the most tool like weapon I’ve ever seen a person manifest, actually. Most people just get a sword though I have seen a bow.”

“Okay, I guess this is kind of cool.”

“Told you! Now one other innate ability of spirit energists is to build up energy inside yourself for later release.”

Oh, that’s what he was doing before. Right, in case she actually manifested the demon, he wanted to be able to deal with it right away.

“Now let’s try that and see what you can do.”

The lesson continued, and Elizabeth managed to beat him in “arm wrestling” by charging energy into herself and releasing it all in a single burst. She received a brief rundown of what else she could do and went home, much more confident than when she had arrived. Derren said they could meet every day that week and continue practicing. He also showed her how to enter a light trance to try contacting her spirit projection.

And what does he want in exchange, I wondered. The inhabitants of most worlds I had visited, this one included with its green rectangles, didn’t do something for nothing. Is he really just doing this out of the goodness of his heart? How does he get money to eat, or buy fuel for that vehicle I saw him in earlier? But this thought didn’t seem to cross her mind, and she got on her bus and chatted with Matt about what she had been learning. Oddly, Zephyr was not sure what to do with him, and he had been forced to practice alone.

She went home that night in better spirits than I had expected, but she still seemed pensive. If I was going to truly get to know this female’s thoughts, I was going to have to implant a probe into her brain. It would

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map her brain function and relay her thoughts to my armor, where they would be translated into something I could understand. I hesitated to deny her the privacy of her own thoughts, but I needed to know more about these humans. That seemed a good a place to start as any.

Inner Dialog

If you can't trust yourself, you can you trust?

The following two days were curious ones. Elizabeth seemed to go back and forth between wanting revenge upon those that caused her friend to die and wanting to forget the whole situation. She flat out refused to practice her ability to project energy attacks, much to the dismay of Derren.

“But being able to throw energy like that is the cornerstone of being a spirit energist. You're totally limiting yourself!” he argued.

“I don't feel comfortable knowing I could just walk up to people and kill them!” she countered. “You're trying to hand a fourteen year old girl a loaded gun. My mom hardly trusts me to stay at home an afternoon and watch my little sister, and you want me to learn how to kill half the people in my neighborhood.”

“Is this about your inner demon? Because it already has a set of skills. Your learning how to project energy won't stop it from being able to do so.”

“No, it's just about me. I don't feel ready to learn how to kill people.”

“It's just like learning karate. People learn that and don't go around murdering everyone. But if they get attacked-”

“Who's going to attack me? Obviously if whoever did this to me wanted me dead, they would just snap their fingers and I would get run over by a car or whatever. They wouldn't risk doing anything physically. They've proven they can do that, after all. The more dangerous I become, the more they're going to take an interest in me. I would rather not have that happen.”

“Don’t you want to protect your friends if they get in trouble?”

“My knowing powers wouldn’t have helped Dee, even if I had been there. Whatever killed her isn’t something I can shoot with an energy blast, that was made clear. Plus, my friends got powers, the same as I did. They can protect themselves, and if that means they learn to kill stuff, so be it. They’ll have to sleep at night with the consequences of their actions just like I would.”

“All right. I won’t press you, but I really do think you’re making the wrong choice here.”

Personally, my estimation of these beings went up a notch as I watched her argue against becoming more dangerous. With a snap (figuratively) of my fingers I could cause this world’s sun to explode, killing everyone. But that decision would weigh heavily on me, and I would most certainly think about it longer than one of these human’s short lives before I did it. The more power one accumulated or was able to use, the more one had to practice restraint. I had looked in on Elizabeth’s friend Sam and he seemed to be taking to his lessons with gusto. As did most of the other young humans that now found themselves with special powers. This one, however, seemed more thoughtful and introspective. Very admirable.

That night Elizabeth practiced her trance state, and I started calibrating the probe for semi-permanent installation. I had the dream data from the first night she had spent with her powers which would help, but that was more of a... what was the human phrase? A “hack job.” This was more subtle, and would need to be powered all the time. While she was doing her breathing exercises I phased the probe into her head and activated it, which started it harmlessly slipping into her neuron structure. It started transmitting data almost immediately, as her entire brain lit up and she went into a sort of waking dream, which I hooked into and went along for the ride.

I found myself in an underground area, and Elizabeth was there looking around. She seemed to find it familiar and instead of panicking, headed off down the corridor. She passed several ants and nodded a greeting to them, and they waved their antennas in response. She didn’t take long to reach a particular ant and smiled at it. How she knew this exact one was the one she was looking for was curious to me, but hardly worth investigating when weighed against all the other crazy things I had seen on this world so far.

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Welcome back, said a voice.

“You can talk!” she exclaimed.

I always could. But you could not always hear. I’m glad you came.

“I wanted to apologize. Because I wanted to keep my inner demon bottled up, that meant you had to be sealed off as well.”

Fortunately, I accept where I am and will gladly answer your call when you need me.

“But what about that demon thing?”

Yes. She will try to subvert your calling and come instead of me. As we are both just different parts of you, there is nothing I can do to stop her doing this. My will is your will, but her will is her own.

“Can you tell me how to suppress her?”

The ant shook its head. No, I do not have that knowledge. I am sorry.

“What’s your name, by the way? Do you have one?”

You already know it.

“I do? Wait, I think I do! Anthy. Your name is Anthy.”

You see. We are one.

“So do you know what happens to me? Can you give me advice or anything?”

Each spirit you learn to call specializes in a certain part of the Earth. Each will influence you mentally or physically, and bestow upon you a special ability relating to that specialization. My specialization is that of the underground. If you need to know where a tunnel is, or how to find the surface, or about something buried underground; come to me.

“Okay, I could see where that could be somewhat useful.”

My special ability is that of the hive- the Power of Assistance. You will find that no matter what those around you are doing, you can help them do it better.

“Sort of like my copycat powers!”

Indeed. Everything about you depends on everything else about you.

“So what about her?”

She is your vanity. The way you love to play pranks on people. She is the part of you that would watch those that hurt you burn.

“But I-”

Do not reject her, you know my words are true. I have felt your need to punish those you see hurting others.

“Yes, but I never would!”

She would. And there is the danger. Become more like her and her words will reach you more than mine.

“I think I got that, the first time we met. That’s why I don’t want to practice the destructive techniques Derren wants me to learn.”

We are all one, different aspects of yourself. I will fight to defend you if you call me. So will she if the situation is serious enough it threatens her existence. But beware of her, for she could turn on your friends in an instant if she felt you were better off without them. She would tell you that she was all you needed, and work towards that end.

“I hate thinking of you as just tools for me to use.”

We are part of your soul, here to assist you in your life. We just have very different ideas about what that assistance should be.

“I’ll remember.”

Good. I hope we can meet in your world some day soon.

“I’m not confident about that, but I’ll try. Can... can I talk to her when I do this too?”

I could lead you to the surface if you wanted. She tries to interfere with us when we go there, but we are all made of the same thing. So she can’t really hurt us. Nonetheless we very rarely go out.

“I should at least see what she has to say.”

The choice is yours. Come.

The two walked through tunnels that led upwards and finally came to a dead end.

Do you want me near?

“I think you would just antagonize her. Let me speak to her alone.”

As you wish.

Anthy tapped the ceiling and a hole opened up, which Elizabeth climbed out of. The hole closed, and she looked around.

“There you are,” she shouted as she skidded down the anthill. “I’m here to talk!”

“Decided to come up and see me, huh?” said a fox with nine tails, trotting up through the trees that surrounded the anthill.

“I thought I should be fair and give you equal time.”

“That’s awfully nice of you. Why?”

“Why? Why not? You’re just as much a part of me as Anthy is, if what she says is true.”

“Anthy, huh? Fitting name for a bug. She’s mostly right. I’m what you could become, if you wanted.”

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“But you're still made up of my soul, right?”

“Trapped in here is more like it. But I suppose if you wanted to be totally accurate, yes, we're both pieces of your soul.”

“So I should at least be civil to you. I can't trust you, and I'm afraid of what you might do if I let you out, but that doesn't mean everything you say is suspect. After all, if I die, so do you.”

“Don't remind me.”

Elizabeth looked around. “So this is where you exist, huh? Part of me is underground and part of me is here.”

“Yeah, and it's boring as heck. Let me out to play sometime, will ya?”

“It seems nice enough.”

“That's because you're all nice and calm now. This is your inner landscape you know- It reflects your mood. When you're angry it's stormy, when you're sad it's raining. You get the idea.”

“You actually get wet here?”

“Wet, cold, and miserable. That's why I just want you to be happy. It makes my existence more bearable.”

“So say that you'll obey me and not just do what you think is right for me.”

“Maybe I know best. Anyway, you don't have enough badges to command me.”

“Badges? What are you... are you talking about Pokémon? Like you have to have enough badges to command high level creatures?”

“Exactly.”

“You're weird.”

“No, you are.”

“No you!”

“No, *you*.”

“I'm not arguing with my inner demon.”

“It's not really an argument, it's just contradiction.”

“Okay, now I know you're part of me.”

“You're the one into weird stuff. I get to pick up on some of it, that's all.”

“Anyway, right now nobody's getting called out. I have enough to worry about with school and learning the basics of my spirit energist stuff.”

“If you don't learn to call one of us and you refuse to learn to attack, you're going to be pretty vulnerable if your friends aren't around. Are you sure you want to make yourself dependent on them like that?”

“I... well, we're a team. We're supposed to help each other out. And now you sound just like Derren.”

“Maybe he’s right. You have to do your part too.”

“I will not become a killer. Not for him, not for you, not for anyone.”

“Even if it would mean saving your friends? I mean hey, it’s your choice, but I know which way I would go.”

“That’s what makes me think I’ve made the right decision.”

“If you say so. Just keep me in mind when all else fails. If you ask nicely, maybe I’ll come out and help you. But then again I might not, it all depends on how nicely you ask.”

“What are your powers anyway? If I’m going to call you I should know.”

“Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s why I asked.”

“Say the magic word.”

“See ya!”

“Okay, okay, fine. Geese, use my loneliness against me, why don’t you? I can see in the dark, I can shoot fire, shapeshift and change my size. I have a lot of energy, and I’m strong and fast. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes it does, thank you. Are you really lonely?”

“Look around. You ever see a tree- talk? I can sort of pick up on what you’re experiencing if it’s a really emotional time, but a lot of times I just lie around here. Nothing to hunt, no men to eat or do... other things to.”

“I should hope not!”

“Tell you what- let me out to seduce someone and I promise I’ll listen to you. Once, anyway. Deal?”

“Wouldn’t I have to be nearby?”

“What, you don’t like to watch?”

“Ugh, no!”

“Your loss. But the offer stands, think it over.”

“I have. No way.”

“Too bad. Well, I’m pretty busy here so come back again soon, nice talking to you, yadda yadda.” She turned and went back into the forest, disappearing around the trees.

“Seduce someone. Probably eat them afterwards too. Like to watch. The nerve.” The forest darkened, and Elizabeth opened her eyes to the real world again.

Part Time Job

Wait, is it a job if you aren't getting paid?

Near the end of the week Derren and Elizabeth discussed trying to call out her spirit projection again, which Elizabeth reluctantly agreed to. They went out into the forest behind the school in case something bad happened, and Matt agreed to join them. They invited Sam along but he had training at that time, so was unable to attend. I was looking forward to seeing what she could do, all this talk about “projecting one’s soul” had me intrigued. Elizabeth didn’t seem confident though.

“All right, this should be far enough,” said Derren, looking around.

“What’s the worst that could happen here?” asked Matt nervously.

“The worst? Well, I suppose whatever this demon is going to be could go completely berserk and try to kill us both.”

“Can you handle that?”

“I’ve discussed it with Liz, she knows how to bring it back under control if it goes that far.”

“I know the theory of how to do it. I can’t say I know exactly what to expect,” she countered.

“Fair enough. But you picked up the technique to stop your power leakage quickly enough, so we should be fine. But yes, if I injure it, Liz will be injured so it should back off. After all, if Liz were to die, it would too, and it doesn’t want that. You ready? Do it just like we talked about. Feel the power inside you. The force that wants to protect you. Reach inside yourself and envision that power taking shape before you.”

They spent about an hour out there, in the cold, trying to draw it out, but Elizabeth finally gave up.

"It's no use. I just keep feeling this demonic presence and can't help but back away from it. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

"It's all right. We still have some time, we can work on barriers some more if you want."

"Do you want to stick around, Matt?" she asked.

"Actually I wanted to speak to Matt about something," said Derren, "if you don't mind."

"No, go ahead."

"First I just wanted to apologize that we hadn't yet found you a petitioner to help train you. I've been asking for updates but I don't get any answer."

"That's okay. Terathel has been teaching me some things on my own."

"Ah, that's the second thing I wanted to talk to you about. We aren't sure you should be listening to... him."

"What? Why not?"

"You remember what I said about no cambion becoming a petitioner before? The holy and unholy powers just not able to be sustained in one body?"

"Yeah, what's that got to do with anything? I thought you said our abilities were just sort of randomized."

"That could still be the case. The other thing that might have happened is that you have sort of an impostor angel."

"Is that possible?"

"Possible? Yes. Likely? Well, it's a unique situation so we can't really be sure what it is."

"This is nuts, he's an angel, he's got to be."

"Why?"

"I- He says." He paused. "Oh."

"You see my point. Our group has been around a long time, and we've never had something like this happen before. So we have to proceed very cautiously. And if that means ignoring your so called angel awhile, so be it."

"I see."

"It's for your own good. If it starts leading you down a path that seems okay but ends up causing problems for you... well, you can guess we don't want that to happen."

"How long has your organization existed?"

"Zephyr? Since the beginning, actually. After the Gates of the Four Winds closed two thousand years ago some people with powers got together and decided they needed to step up. Keep the world safe, and all

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that, you know? So they did, and here we are. We're actually named after one of the gates."

"Of course being a secret society there's no way to know if you're telling me the truth either."

"Ultimately I suppose you'll have to take on faith we are who we say we are. I can't give you any more than my word."

"Say, about that..." Elizabeth said.

"Yes?"

"I wasn't particularly religious before. But now I know there are angels and demons and Heaven and everything. But isn't it faith that's rewarded? I don't have faith anymore, I have certainty. Right? So doesn't that sort of disqualify me or anything?"

Derren laughed. "No, no. That's way too deep a subject to get into now. But suffice it to say that you still need some measure of faith even now. After all, this whole situation could just be powerful aliens manipulating you."

Hey, don't look at me.

"Or this could all be a dream of yours, because you're in a coma. You still have to have faith that your choices matter, and that doing the right thing means something. That's what matters."

"Oh. Okay."

"So, I've delivered my message as ordered. You can ignore it, or not, but please be very, very careful about doing things your so called angel tells you do to, okay?"

"I'll consider it."

"That's all I can ask. Let's get back to training!"

So the rest of the week passed, and Elizabeth was still insistent about not learning energy attacks. Also she seemed no closer to being ready to call out her projection. Still, my patience had been forged by millennia, I was in no rush. School began again after a funeral was held for the students that had been killed, a ceremony I took a great deal of interest in.

The first day back the group had a surprise waiting for them- the young humans who now had nonstandard physical features were totally normal looking again! Both Elizabeth and Matt expressed their astonishment, which mirrored my own. They soon got a hastily whispered explanation,

which allowed me to compensate and bring those features back into my perception again.

“It’s the rings,” said one, showing it to the pair. “We all got one. It makes anything out of the ordinary about us totally invisible! Isn’t that great!”

I surmised it must be a “talisman” such as I had seen made earlier that generated that force field. I wondered just how far these talisman things could go, as just the two I had now seen seemed to defy the laws of physics. Well, I could study them later if I had to.

That afternoon at lunch, Sam seemed very excited and ran over to the table where Elizabeth and Matt were sitting.

“I got permission to show you what I’ve been learning,” he said excitedly. “Meet me after class and I’ll show you!”

“My mother is going to start getting suspicious with me taking the late bus all the time. I wonder if I could ask Derren for permission to tell her what happened?” asked Elizabeth of no one in particular.

“Are you guys coming or not?”

“Okay, okay. We’ll come,” said Matt. “Don’t get so worked up about it. But I asked about meeting with the other cambions this afternoon so it’ll have to be after that.”

“Come see me first, it’ll only take a minute.”

“If you say so. That’s fine.”

“Great! What’s for lunch?”

That afternoon after classes finished the three got back together. Sam looked around and finally shoved everything on the teacher’s desk over to one side.

“Hey, I like a good prank but isn’t that going too far?” protested Elizabeth. “Plus, what does that have to do with your power?”

“I’m not going to lay down on the floor!”

“Why do you need to lay down at all?”

“You’ll see!”

He concentrated, and a vibrationally separate entity sprang up from the desk, making his body go inert. He seemed to be dressed in lion’s skins, a rather primitive garment, I observed. I also noticed he carried no weapon, totally unlike the other spirit hunters I had watched those first days upon my arrival to this planet. So had he not yet learned to create it, or did he not have one? I would have to see.

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“Tada!” he shouted, spreading his arms wide. “Isn’t that the coolest?”

“That is pretty great,” said Matt, nudging Elizabeth.

“Okay, you’re a spirit hunter,” she said. “We knew people could do that, remember? We met Rosalita and that kid from the dance wandered around for days before we found him.”

“Yeah, but this is me.”

“And what are you wearing?”

“Liz!” said Matt, shocked.

“Okay, okay, I give up. It is pretty cool, are you happy?” She was laughing.

“That’s better. They’ve even had me go on missions, I bet neither of you has done anything!”

“Yeah, I have so many powers at my disposal,” remarked Matt bitterly. “I’ll be saving the world in no time.”

“What is up with your powers, anyway? I heard you were being possessed by a demon or something?”

“He’s an angel! Terathel is an angel. How many times? Who did you hear that from, anyway?”

“Oh, uh, I don’t know. Just around, I guess. Are you sure it’s an angel?”

“What else could it be?”

“The Zephyr people don’t exactly know, isn’t that the point?”

“What do you think?” he said, rounding on Elizabeth.

“Me? Oh! I don’t know. Personally I find Derren’s pushing me to learn how to blow stuff up a little creepy. So I’m not sure how much I trust them. They are the only source of information we have at the moment. Until we can get in contact with another group or someone independent of them, we can’t be sure what their real goals are. Derren could be right or just overly cautious. I don’t know.”

“So you don’t trust what my angel says either, is that it? I’m going to meet with Elsa, I’ll be back later.” He stormed out.

Wait, is that what she said? She just said she couldn’t trust Zephyr, wouldn’t that mean she trusted the angel of his more? Maybe I don’t have as good an understanding of their language as I thought.

“What’s with him?” asked Sam, as Matt stomped down the hallway away from the others.

“He’s just frustrated, and I wish there was some way I could help

him. But he's just going to have to decide who to trust and watch for any deception or hard proof one group or the other isn't on the level. I hope it's not the 'angel' that can't be trusted. If it's really attached to his soul I don't know how we would ever get rid of it. They say I can't get rid of my fox, and that's attached to me, so it's the same thing. I know how he feels, but it must be worse for him as he can't know if what he's being told is true. I at least know my source is demonic."

"Yeah I guess. So when are we going to see your powers in action? You're refusing to learn how to blow stuff up? That's crazy!"

"So tell me about this so called "mission" you went on," Elizabeth replied, ignoring the question.

"It was great," said Sam, lowering his voice and leaning towards Elizabeth. "Zephyr thinks some people in this town are conspiring with demons and apparently they found some proof. This one guy had a coin that I guess was cursed so they had me go in to get it away from him. It was wild- he couldn't see me at all. I just walked past him, found the coin, and walked out again."

"You stole something from someone?"

"No, I made sure a dangerous magical object or... whatever didn't get used."

"No questions asked huh? I guess we know who you've decided to trust. How do you know they won't use it?"

"Aw, what do you know about it anyway?"

The two sat in silence for a moment.

Odd, if this coin owner couldn't see him, he can't see vibrationally separate forms. That means he does not have powers, so how would he conspire with demons in the first place?

"So what's your next job?"

"Oh, I'm going to take care of that ghost we talked to earlier. The one by the bus stop?"

"That seems safe enough."

"It should be easy. Want to come?"

"Yeah, I can help with my copycat powers if nothing else."

"Okay."

The two talked about school stuff for a few more minutes until Matt came back, looking only slightly less disgusted now.

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“How did it go?” asked Elizabeth.

“He wasn’t here yet. I guess they’ve asked some specialist or something to come in and see what my powers are all about. But he hasn’t arrived yet.”

“You want to come see me put that ghost to rest? It shouldn’t take long, it’s not that far away.”

“Yeah, fine,” answered Matt with a shrug.

They left the room and Elizabeth started to say something, glancing back at Sam’s body still lying there on the desk. She must have thought better of it and just shook her head.

The three left school and headed down the street towards the “ghost” they were talking about. I was interested to see what they had in mind, but honestly all this moving about through three dimensional space they were doing was so tedious! How did they cope?

They finally arrived and acted like they were again talking to something there. I scanned the area and at last decided there was a sort of energy signature there, but an odd one. They were talking to it though, so they must have believed it had some kind of observable presence. I even tried changing what frequency my visor was displaying, thinking that perhaps whatever they were talking with had yet another vibrational frequency than the things I had already seen. No luck. Odd.

Both Sam and Elizabeth put their hands in empty air and seemed to concentrate. Sam was speaking in a soft voice about how it was time to move on and suddenly they both smiled.

“That actually worked,” remarked Matt, surprised.

“As if there was any doubt!” replied Sam.

“Just remember who helped you out,” said Elizabeth.

“Ah, I could have done it on my own.”

“If you say so.”

The three headed back and Elizabeth expressed interest in meeting the other cambions Matt was talking with, so they went into the school. When they entered the classroom I saw a couple of kids I had seen around the place and a very pale looking man I didn’t recognize. Another adult, a female, was also in the room and nodded to Matt as he entered. She gestured over to the pale fellow, and Matt looked over at him.

“Kind of you to finally show up,” he sneered.

“Hey, I was here earlier and you weren’t, so I went to take care of something.”

“I’m sure it was of the utmost importance to you. Now can we get on with this?”

“You can tell me what my powers are?”

“Indeed, that is why I’ve been summoned.”

“All right, that’s fine.”

The man moved over to Matt and grabbed his shoulders, leaning down towards his face. I saw Elizabeth’s eyes get a little wider and she moved off to the side to get a better view.

“Hey, what’s the big idea?” shouted Matt, squirming free of the man’s grip. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

The man rolled his eyes. “I thought you understood. I’m a breath stealer, so the only way we’re going to get some answers is if I sample your soul. I do that by breathing in the residual energies you give off. Honestly, what did you think I was going to do?”

“I don’t even want to think about it!” He turned to the other adult. “And this is the only way?”

She nodded. “It’s the most reliable.”

He looked back at the man.

“What are you so worried about?” asked the man. “I won’t say ‘this won’t hurt a bit’ because it just might, but you’ll survive the experience. Unless you’re having second thoughts about finding out about your powers?”

“No, I just... you caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

“Then may I proceed?”

Matt looked hesitant, and looked over at Elizabeth. She had what I considered a very excited look with a weird grin and nodded her head really fast.

Matt sighed.

“Fine.”

Once again the pale man grabbed Matt and leaned over to his face. I peered forward intently as the man began to breathe deeply near Matt’s face. Matt seemed to be struggling with himself as a thin ribbon of energy seemed to leave his body and enter that of the pale man’s. This went on for several seconds until Matt was released and staggered back. Elizabeth ran over to him and helped steady him.

“Please tell me you got something from all that,” Matt pleaded. “I don’t want to go through it again.”

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“It was quite enjoyable for me,” remarked the man. “Thanks to you I get to live another few months. But enough about me. I can tell you with assurance that you are a cambion with three main abilities, all passive. Firstly you can understand any spoken language. All demons and angels can do this, so it’s not really that remarkable. Second you can see in total darkness, which I’m sure you’ve already noticed unless you’re totally oblivious. Third, and this is the most curious of the bunch, you are somewhat immune to spiritual energy from other people.”

“What do you mean, ‘spiritual energy?’”

The man snapped his fingers and there was a spark of electricity from his hand. “Anything like that. It’s a double edged sword, actually, because even beneficial things will have a harder time touching you.”

“Like healing?” asked Elizabeth.

“Or wards, or helpful spirits, yes, that type of thing.”

“That’s handy to know, but what about his angel? Is it an angel or not? Wasn’t that the point of this whole thing?”

“That I cannot tell you. I can sense what powers his soul has, and whatever you say is attached to him isn’t a power.”

“Oh.” Matt looked disappointed, and still not fully recovered from his experience.

“You’re welcome,” said the man.

“Yes, thank you, it’s good to know,” said the woman, coming over. “At least we know you don’t have to practice any of your abilities, they will just be there when you need them. That’s important to know. You’ll have to forgive him, he’s probably not thinking straight because of the procedure.”

“Yes, I’m familiar with the effects. If there’s nothing else?”

The woman shook her head. “No, thanks for your help.”

“Then I will take my leave. Goodbye.”

What a pleasant individual.

“Are you okay?” Elizabeth asked him once the man was gone.

“I’ll be fine, it just felt really weird. And I’m really tired and shaky right now. I think it’s about time to head home.”

“Yeah, let’s get you on the bus.”

“Thanks Elsa,” he said to the lady. “I do appreciate knowing. But you couldn’t find someone a little... nicer?”

“He was the only one available. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. See you later.”

The two boarded the bus, with Elizabeth steadying Matt until they sat down.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. What are friends for? Actually,” she paused. She lowered her voice a bit. “He stole energy from you?”

“Yeah, I guess? I felt a little weaker when he was doing it. Why?”

“I can give you some of my energy if you think it’ll help. At least I think I can, it’s one of the few spirit energist things I can learn without mastering other things.”

“You would know that better than me. You’re the one with the energy powers.”

“Okay, I’ll try it!”

She placed her hand on Matt’s arm and concentrated, presumably trying to send him energy. Matt took a deep breath and seemed to perk up a little.

“Okay, wow, that’s really working! I do feel better, thanks!”

“You’re welcome,” mumbled Elizabeth, turning red.

Can't Win Them All

*You've got to know when to hold them,
know when to fold them*

The next day at lunch the three young humans got together and Sam excitedly sat down at the table.

"There's another ghost they want me to take care of, if you want to come!" he exclaimed.

How many of these things are around here, anyway?

Matt and Elizabeth looked at each other. "Sure, why not?" said Matt.

"I'll be happy to help again!"

"I thought I would try it on my own this time. I won't always have your help, after all."

"You can always ask for my help, but I guess I see what you mean. Then I reserve the right to laugh if you can't do it."

"That's not nice," said Matt.

"I just said laugh, not laugh and point."

"Why didn't you say so? That's totally different then!" Matt rolled his eyes.

"Be serious you guys! This ghost has been standing around here for like the last two hundred years. We need to do something about it."

"Two hundred? What the heck? Why hasn't someone done something about this?" asked Elizabeth.

"I guess this area just wasn't important enough to investigate until now. You have to realize, there's only so many people with- like us, and much bigger threats to deal with. So a ghost standing around is pretty low on the priority list, you know?"

“At least what happened has brought some attention to this area if nothing else,” countered Elizabeth. “If you keep doing these missions we’ll soon have the town ghost free.”

They left the cafeteria to go to their next classes when Matt whirled and stared at a janitor’s closet to his right.

“Did you see that?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

“See what?” asked Sam, looking around.

“There, in that closet! There’s a... thing there!”

They all looked, and I noticed it too. A small, scaly looking creature was standing there, looking out at them through the slightly opened door.

“Demon!” shouted Sam, lunging for it. The thing gave a squeak and slammed the door shut in Sam’s face. He rattled the doorknob.

“Are you sure?” hissed Matt. “I mean it could be anything. Who knows what sort of weird things we can see now that we couldn’t before?”

“Oh I’m sure it was a demon. We’ve got it trapped in there, how can we get this door open?”

“Just leave it,” said Elizabeth. “It’s so small, it couldn’t do any harm.”

“No. No, we have to get it out of there. It doesn’t matter how big they are, we have to kill it. Come on!”

The others were looking at Sam like he’d gone nuts, and jumped back in surprise as he smashed the door with his shoulder, breaking the frame. The door sprang back and Sam looked around wildly for the creature.

“Where is it? Where is it?” he shouted.

“It’s up there,” pointed out Matt, indicating one of the shelves.

“Ah ha!” Sam went to grab it, but the creature deftly avoided him and skittered away again. “I’ll get you yet!” yelled Sam, grabbing a mop and starting to flail about with it.

I watched in stunned amazement as the contents of the closet were swiftly demolished by Sam. He seemed to have gone wild with bloodlust, not even really paying attention as the “demon” scurried off down the corridor. No one paid attention to it because all the young humans were busy watching Sam lay about the room with his improvised weapon, the mop, screaming about killing something. Finally a uniformed male ran up and grabbed Sam out of the closet, and started dragging him down the hallway.

“Tell them!” Sam shouted. “You saw it! You have to tell them!”

“Tell the principle it was a rat,” Elizabeth shouted back. “It’s the only thing he’ll believe.”

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“There was a demon!” Sam wailed.

“RAT!” laughed Elizabeth, watching her friend being hauled away.

“Do you think we should go with him?” asked Matt.

“He was the one that started tearing the place up,” she replied. She looked back at the wreckage. “Wow. Even without being special he can do some damage.”

“Oh, he’s special all right,” one other young male said, shaking his head and walking away.

Tone indicates sarcasm my visor printed up into my view.

“But we did see-”

“So what?” she interrupted. “We saw something, yes. Maybe that poor little thing has lived here for years. We don’t know. And Sam gets one whiff of it and starts tearing the place down? No. He has to learn a thing I like to call restraint. Better that he learn it now before he’s really strong enough to hurt someone and winds up regretting it.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“What was that all about, anyway? He just threw sanity out the window for a minute? I don’t buy it. Something’s up with him. Come on, we have to get to class.”

I too wondered about the change that had come over Sam when he saw that creature. I hadn’t observed Elizabeth’s friends for long, but it did seem a bit extreme, even for him. It also interested me that the creature wasn’t vibrationally separate from this world. In theory, any person here could have spotted it, so I found it strange Matt had been the one. Everyone cleared out of the halls and went to class, leaving me to ponder why some “otherworldly” life forms that existed here were vibrationally separate and others were not. Strange.

That afternoon when classes were finished, Sam came to find Elizabeth by her locker.

“And how is the valiant warrior this afternoon?” she chortled.

“Oh, laugh it up. I got detention of all things so I’m not sure about doing the ghost thing after school.”

“And a stern talking to I hope. What did you tell them?”

He looked uncomfortable. “That it was a rat.”

“Ha! Told you.”

“Anyway, I have a plan to still do the mission. I’ll just “go to sleep” during detention and meet you guys.”

“Where are we going, anyway?”

“Oh yeah, I never said. I have the whole thing planned out. Walk to the library and we’ll meet outside. From there we’ll head to the cemetery, then head to the high school and take their late bus home.”

“Will that work?”

“I got the bus numbers and everything. It’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.”

“If you say so.”

Sam went to his “detention” which I thought he needed. He had seemed quite tense this past afternoon, so if he could “detense” it might do him a world of good. Matt and Elizabeth headed to the library, and she went inside. She was obviously well known here as she was greeted by name by many inside, and she wandered about the shelves saying “Read it.” “Read it.” Over and over.

Not long after arriving, Sam came running up, quite out of breath. They headed to a “cemetery,” which after scanning the area turned out to be a ritual burial ground. *Quite a waste of good land*, I thought, given the finite nature of the planet. If these people had space travel I could see wanting to be interred in the planet that had sustained your life. As it was, having so much land basically without purpose seemed odd to me. But it was their culture so I didn’t dismiss it.

They walked to a small building and I got to hear part of a conversation they had with whatever they saw as being there. Apparently whatever it was seemed more responsive than the first one they had visited, and they had a small discussion about what to do about it.

“He says he’s guarding the place. He seems content enough, let’s just let him stay here,” said Elizabeth.

“No way. There can’t be anything in there from two hundred years ago that’s valuable to anyone today. Besides, he’s a ghost. What does he know?” countered Sam.

“He has a point. He’s a ghost, can he really do anything if someone tried to break in?” put in Matt.

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“No one’s broken into the place these last two hundred years, have they?”

“Exactly! Because there’s nothing in there!”

“That’s not the point. He thinks there is, and he’s happy here. Who are we to come along and yank him away from what he sees is his duty?”

“Don’t you think he’d be happier in Heaven?”

“Can you guarantee he’ll go there?”

“Uh... he seems like a nice enough guy!”

“So do rapists until they try raping someone!”

“Guys, guys, let’s not let this get out of hand,” said Matt, stepping between the two. “Sam, in your professional opinion, should all ghosts be sent on no matter what?”

He’s a professional now?

“Yes.”

“Then that’s what we’re going to do. It’s Sam’s call, he’s the one who has the power to do it.”

“Fine, whatever. Go to it.”

“I may need your help.”

“Oh, I thought you wanted to try it for yourself this time?”

“Not with that. I want you to distract him so I can sneak around the back and jump him from above.”

She shook her head. “Whatever.”

They went over to talk to the “ghost” again and Sam tried to look casual as he slipped around the back of the building and jumped atop it. Choosing his moment, Sam gave a cry and landed on something, which from the looks of things tried to shake him off.

Suddenly Sam was on the ground clutching his shoulder, and blood, or whatever equivalent was inside this odd body of his, started pouring out. Elizabeth reacted instantly, a strange weapon appearing in her hand, firing some kind of energy packet, then disappearing again. She got a surprised look on her face, was she not expecting that to happen? And where did that strange weapon come from?

I really wish I could follow this more closely.

Then both Elizabeth and Sam seemed to be holding something down and saying something, possibly trying to force this presence out of this

world? It seemed this time they succeed because they suddenly relaxed and didn't look like they were holding anything anymore.

“Well,” said Elizabeth, brushing herself off. “That was certainly interesting.”

“Where did you get that gun from?” asked Matt.

“I don't know. I just wanted to get that gun away from him, and when he shot Sam I saw my chance. I just emulated it thinking I could just throw a bullet or something but then the gun appeared. You are okay, right Sam?”

“I'll live. Once I get back to my body this will basically go away, so I'll be fine. Thanks for your help.”

“Sure!” she said brightly. “The three musketeers: 2, local ghosts-” she made a circle with her fingers. “Zero.”

They made their way to a school for older kids and boarded the bus sitting out front. They both made it home without incident, and I figured on another quiet night. It was for the most part, but Matt communicated to her that Sam was actually taken to the hospital during that time because no one could wake him up! He had to run all the way there to find his body, where the staff was running tests to find out why he had suddenly lost consciousness.

Elizabeth just laughed and laughed when she heard that.

She wasn't laughing the next day when her bus passed that cemetery and Matt noticed the place had police cars all around it. He checked the local news and discovered it had been broken into the night before. The body inside the building the kids had visited had been mutilated, and police were calling for any information on why this might have been done. Apparently they were trying to see if any family members were around and could tell them if something had been stolen from inside. Sam was quite upset when he was told what had happened, and spent the rest of the day quite pensive.

That afternoon when Elizabeth met with Derren for more training, she brought up a concern she had about her mother.

“She's noticed I'm taking the late bus more now, and not reading as much because I'm focusing on powers now. What do I tell her if she asks?”

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Should I just make something up? Tell her the truth? I mean most powers are passed down through families, right? I'm sure you told me that. So most parents already know their kids have powers."

"I guess my advice would be to just play the situation by ear," he replied after a moments thought. "I'm sure you have some idea how she would react. And if she takes it badly Zephyr can always step in and smooth things over. Naturally we prefer to keep powers secret as best we can, but your situation is unique. I could see you wanting to tell her now, so that she can get used to the idea before you have to run off sometime. But knowing you can do all kinds of things that she and your siblings can't will change your relationship. Maybe for the better, maybe for the worse. Again, only you know how that might go."

Why would she have to "run off" sometime? That seems an odd thing to say.

"Oh, okay. I guess I can accept that."

"Ready to try calling out your spirit projection again?"

"No, give me a few more days."

"Okay."

The next several days showed a marked increase in small "demons" running about the school. I saw several different "species" if they could be called that, but none of them were vibrationally separate. They stayed out of the way, but somehow Matt was always spotting them, no matter how well they tried to hide. The group discussed what to do about it, and predictably Sam wanted to just destroy them totally. Derren agreed, but with the possibility of not burning the building down or anything. Matt offered to use an ability he'd learned of which would allow him to banish the creatures back to their dimension, which Derren approved of. Elizabeth worried that if all the small creatures were sent away, maybe stronger, more powerful things would come in their place.

This sounds like correct thinking to me. I would send more powerful things in until whatever I wanted done was accomplished.

In any case, Matt did stay after school and wandered around after everyone left, Banishing demons. He reported to Elizabeth later that he managed to get rid of several, and got in a lot of practice with the technique.

Sam's behavioral changes were also remarked upon during this time, as Matt and Elizabeth wondered if there was something they should do about it.

"But what can we do?" asks Matt. "Okay, he seems to hate demons with a passion. Maybe we should too. Yeah, Terathel says they're evil and everything, but that the ones around school are mostly harmless. Now maybe he's just feeding me a line as Zephyr still has yet to produce either a summoner or a petitioner to try and figure out where my power is coming from. So it could still be a demon and not an angel that's attached to me."

"Why would he show you a technique to banish demons if he was a demon?"

"If he didn't it might be suspicious?"

"I guess. I just hope his tutor isn't filling his head with a lot of weird ideas, that's all."

"Like what?"

"It's something Derren said. I asked him about telling my mom about my powers. She said if my mom took it badly, Zephyr could smooth things over again. I think he was implying mind control or something. What if he's being controlled somehow?"

"Why would anyone do that?"

"Remember that building in the cemetery? They said the door was ripped off and the inside was smashed up. Who do we know that's really strong and could probably do something like that?"

"You don't think..."

"I don't know what to think. He seemed more weirded out than anything when he heard it had happened. And now all this anger at demons? Where's it coming from?"

"I really hope you're wrong."

"I do too. But something happened that night. Why bust into a two hundred year old crypt? And right after that ghost disappeared? I mean if something really valuable *was* in there, a ghost a couple of kids can take care of shouldn't have ever been a problem for someone that can rip stone apart. And why destroy a body? If that ghost is in Heaven now, it doesn't care. He's not coming back, so there's no point to it."

"I don't know." He seemed to listen for a moment. "Terathel says there is no connection anymore, it's just a dried up old body. So he doesn't know of any reason that was done either. Unless he had swallowed something before he died?"

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“Gross.”

“I’m just trying to think of all the angles.”

“And another thing, these 'missions' of his. Shouldn’t whoever is training him be more responsible about sending him out to do stuff? I mean, having him steal stuff, and go up against ghosts? He’s had powers only two weeks! Yes, that first one went fine, but the other one actually shot him! That was dangerous! Sam had no real backup at all, just us! We are not backup! If he hadn’t asked us, on his own initiative, to come along, what would have happened to him? Or what if that guy he stole from had powers, too? That really could have ended badly.”

“I agree. We underestimated that ghost, something I thought I would never hear myself say. I think there’s a lot going on here we aren’t aware of yet. Keep your eyes open, okay?”

“Always.”

ROBERT ZIEFEL

12

Flame

Only you can prevent... You know the rest

Over the weekend Elizabeth was doing homework and listening to a radio when she suddenly looked over at it. These sorts of moments were terribly tedious for me, but I had just about mapped her brain patterns. Well, technically my armor had almost done so, meaning I would soon be able to hear her thoughts. I couldn't yet, but her interest in the song that was playing made me pay closer attention to it. Many cultures I had encountered used music as part of their cultural expressions, some to an even greater extent than humans. My armor looked up the song and highlighted the passage that caused her heightened response.

“You're burning, yearning for somebody to tell you, that life ain't passing you by. I'm trying to tell you, it will if you don't even try. You can fly if you'd only cut loose, footloose, kick off your Sunday shoes.”

Apparently sung by an artist by the name of Kenny Loggins in 1984. I wasn't sure what “Sunday shoes” were but the message was clear, especially in relation to her situation. She seemed to sit and stare at nothing awhile after that, thinking. I really wished I had the complete brain matrix finished, and did get a little bit of what she was thinking about. In the end she seemed to come to a decision and whispered “Okay, I'm gonna do it!” before going back to doing homework.

I discovered what she was referring to the next day, as she went into school with a new resolve and seemed impatient for the day to end.

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Now you know how I feel, little one.

There was a brief scuffle during lunch when some young humans clustered around a notebook were hassled by a larger young human, who started tearing pages out of it. Matt went over to see what the fuss was about, and got the larger one to go sit back down. I wondered, would he have been so brave if he didn't have that odd force protecting him?

He was invited to sit down by a female also sitting at the table, so he accepted.

"Guess he found better friends," said Sam sarcastically.

"What is up with you lately?" asked Elizabeth.

"I don't know. I've been getting flashes of my past life, I guess. It's messing with me."

"Well make it stop. You know we're in this together. Just because he went to go help those guys doesn't mean he isn't our friend anymore."

"Yeah, I know."

"So how's your training coming?"

"Okay. Apparently theres this thing most spirit hunters can do, it's called incantations. It's really a sort of magic, it's pretty cool! But whatever I try to do just fizzles. So they aren't sure what's holding me back there. Mordecai, that's my trainer, says most hunters carry a weapon that they can call more power out of. All I have are my fists, and when I try to call out to my weapon I get a vision of this lion, which is weird. But otherwise, yeah, it's going okay. How about you?"

"Actually, I'm glad you asked! I've decided to try calling out my spirit projection again today. Want to come?"

"What's it do?"

"You know how you leave your body totally to get your powers?"

"Yeah."

"I can do something similar. The difference is, only part of my soul leaves my body, so I can still move around. It won't be as powerful as you are, but it doesn't leave me as vulnerable either."

"Sounds interesting. Why do you need me there?"

"That demon in my soul will probably take control of it and manifest instead. I'm worried about it going crazy, that's why I couldn't do it before, I think."

"But now you think you can?"

“I feel ready. I’m going to take it on and force it to obey me!”

“That’s the spirit. Okay, you’ve convinced me, I’ll be there to punch it into submission if that’s what it takes.”

“Thanks Sam.”

Oh, so that’s what you were thinking about when you heard that song. Perhaps this will be an interesting day after all.

At that point Matt came back and sat down.

“What was that all about?” asked Elizabeth.

“Just a bully being a bully. Did I miss anything over here?”

“Liz is going to try calling out her projection again,” answered Sam.

“Really? I’ve got something to show you guys too, maybe we can do it together!”

“Finally have something to show off?” Sam smirked.

“That’s right. I’m going to try petitioning a phoenix.”

“Didn’t Derren tell you not to play around with stuff until he was sure what exactly you were going to get?” asked Sam.

“We talked about that, who to trust. Until Zephyr or Terathel shows they can’t be trusted, I’m siding with Terathel. He is attached to me, after all. Plus, if we’re doing one dangerous thing this afternoon, why not do two?”

“I guess Derren being around is the smartest thing to do, in case you get something you aren’t expecting.”

“Same with Liz here. It’s perfect!”

“It’ll be perfect if we can both pull it off.”

“I haven’t done it, but Terathel says I’m doing the ritual right, I just have to put the energy into it. So we’ll see.”

“Stupid classes, we still have hours before we can do this stuff! I want to see it now!”

“Patience Sam. You’ll make it.”

Elizabeth got everyone together after school and the group headed out to the woods again. Matt explained what he wanted to do, which I think gave Derren mixed feelings.

“I suppose we need to find out sooner or later, as we don’t have any experts yet to tell us.”

“What is up with that?” asked Sam.

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“I’m just a peon, don’t ask me. All right, go ahead.”

“The normal ritual is ten minutes,” Matt said sheepishly. “Terathel tells me with practice I can shave some time off of that, but for now I think I’ll just do it by the book. Here goes!”

Matt began a complicated series of gestures, pleas to a higher power to grant him an audience with a phoenix, and energy discharges. I was of course recording every second both visually and with an array of sensors I had set up around the area. True to his word, ten minutes later and in a burst of flame a large bird appeared next to him, and started looking around. The bird was tall, for a bird, about half as tall as Darren. It had a large wingspan and golden feathers, tipped with iridescent ones. Scanning it I noticed it was not vibrationally separate from the universe, and I could have sworn it looked right at me for a split second. I hastily checked my camouflage system which reported being at a hundred percent efficiency, as always. Odd. It continued looking around and brought its gaze over to the three young humans staring at it.

“Goodness,” it said. “It’s almost as though you’ve never seen a phoenix before. My name is Iris, to what do I owe the pleasure of being petitioned today?”

“Oh, uh, it’s nice to meet you Iris,” began Matt. “And I’m afraid it’s just practice, that you’re petitioned today.”

“I thought you looked a little young! Not to worry, that’s fine. It’s always nice to see the human world every once in a while.”

“Well?” asked Matt to Derren.

“I admit it looks like a phoenix,” he replied. “And you seemed to be using a holy prayer, but it still doesn’t actually prove anything one way or the other.”

“How can this not prove I’m a petitioner?” he yelled, pointing at Iris.

“Is there some question I am not what I seem to be?” it asked.

“If you truly are a phoenix then I apologize but this young man is most certainly a cambion so it would be almost impossible for him to be a petitioner.”

“I see. Well, you only have my word that I am from Heaven, so I’m not sure what other proof to offer.”

“How could it be a demon, anyway?” asked Elizabeth.

“When something is summoned, a connection is made between the summoner and the demon. It has a short but adequate time to know it’s being

summoned and do something. In this case, perhaps change shape into that of a phoenix.”

“But what about the prayer?”

“I admit, that’s a little harder, but he’s being taught this stuff by whatever he’s attached to. If that thing wanted to teach him a ritual that seemed angelic, but in fact wasn’t, he could. It’s the spirit energy and attracting the attention of the being that’s summoned that counts in the end.”

“So he could have set up something with a demon beforehand, like ‘if you get summoned by this Matt kid, look like a phoenix.’”

“Yes, exactly.”

“I’m a little hurt,” remarked the phoenix. “Why is this even an issue?”

“These kids didn’t come by their power in the usual way,” he explained.

“Oh, these are some of *them!* I understand perfectly now. Yes, we’ve been aware of some odd things happening here on Earth. Say no more.”

“I don’t want to take up your time, so I guess—”

“Wait!” shouted Elizabeth.

“Yes?” asked Iris.

“If you don’t mind staying a little longer, we could use your help. I’m about to try something a little dangerous, and having more, uh, assistants around would help me feel more at ease.”

I think she didn’t want to say people.

“Sunrise is hours away,” said Iris, looking up at the sky. “So we have plenty of time before I’ll be forced to divert my attention...”

“Great!” said Derren. “Are you ready Liz?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Okay, remember what we’ve been talking about. Don’t will it to appear, convince it to appear.”

It didn’t take nearly as long as Matt’s petitioning for Elizabeth to get a result, and my armor warned me about an extreme energy buildup in the local area. Seconds later a huge gout of fire appeared and rushed into the sky, reveling a human sized ant standing a few feet away. The ant was wreathed in fire, and I could feel the raw energy arcing through the air around the group.

What has this female unleashed? This is what’s inside her? How is that even possible?

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The flames began to coalesce, forming into nine separate strands around the... creature. All around, ice and snow were melting and turning to water, and there was a large circle around the creature that was already cleared of snow to the ground below. The air around the group became noticeably warmer, I'm sure even the humans without advanced sensors recording the whole thing noticed, as they stared at this thing. Suddenly there was a final burst of flame and standing where the ant was a human looking woman suddenly appeared.

She was dressed in an outfit I had never seen before, with a skirt that started way above her waist, and flared out like a bell. My armor identified it as Korean- at least in shape. The images I pulled up from their "internet" didn't show them being that... transparent. It showed off her lower half to great effect, and had been strategically slit in several places from top to bottom. Her top was sleeveless and loose, and both younger males were staring openly at her as she stretched her arms behind her head like she was just waking up. Her shiny black hair was almost touching the ground, and tied at the very end with a red bow. She had on silver earrings, and an ornamental comb stuck in the front part of her hair. She looked around.

"It's about time I got out of there," she purred. "Hello boys."

"So you're the one I've been seeing in my dreams," said Elizabeth.

"Quite right, my host. But now we can finally speak more directly. You may call me Elizabeth. As I am you, after all."

"That would be confusing," said Elizabeth, looking her over. "I'll call you Dizabeth."

"You're beautiful," blurted Sam, taking a step towards her.

"Aren't you sweet?" she replied, leaning forward a little towards him. She caught sight of the phoenix who was trying to edge between her and Matt, who kept stepping around him.

"Don't be shy now, introduce yourself," she said to him. "You don't have to protect him little sun singer. If I wanted to kill him I would just have done *this*." She suddenly spun around and launched a stream of fire upwards at some nearby trees, causing them to ignite and start burning. She started laughing.

"Oh yes, that does feel good."

"Hey, stop that!" yelled Elizabeth.

"Why should I? Fourteen years I've been cooped up in your soul. I want to go a little wild."

“Because if you ever want to come out again, you’ll do what I say!”

“Hummm, there is that, I suppose. But come, you still haven’t introduced yourselves.” She leaned over a little again in the direction of the two younger males.

What an odd gesture. I guess it means something to them?

“Sam,” said Sam at the same time Matt said “Matt.”

Dlizabeth gave a little laugh. “Such eagerness. Oh I could teach you things, young ones. Oh yes.”

“You stay away from them!”

She ignored Elizabeth and turned to Derren. “And who do we have here? Perhaps someone with a little more... experience, perhaps?”

“Don’t even try it, I know what you are.”

“So bold. I like it. I bet you do the tying up, don’t you?”

The what? The others looked similarly confused.

Suddenly a loud howl echoed through the trees and both Dlizabeth and Derren whipped their heads about, looking for the source. The younger humans I noticed seemed to be paralyzed, only their eyes darted about trying to figure out where that howling was coming from. Analyzing it I noticed an odd energy signature embedded in the frequency, and wondered what sort of creature could do that. The answer was forthcoming, as two large, shaggy animals crunched their way through the snow towards them. They were obviously not entirely biological, as literal smoke was coming out of their noses as they breathed. When they opened their mouths I could see the inside glowing with heat, and realized these must be creatures from that weird other world- what Elizabeth would call “demons.”

I had hoped for some more glimpses of that world, but so far it had hardly even been mentioned. *Still, all in good time, my patience is limitless.* I thought. *I’ll be interested to see if she can shake off this fear these creatures seem to be instilling in her. Or perhaps this Dlizabeth creature will come to her aid. I would like to see more of what it’s capable of doing.*

“Snap out of it you guys!” yelled Derren, throwing a bolt of energy at the nearest one. It lunged at him and knocked him to the ground. The other spit fire at Dlizabeth, who was totally unconcerned as it just washed

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over her, leaving her unharmed. “Please,” she said, looking down at it. Derren meanwhile was making some very odd noises as he grappled with the animal, who was trying to bite at him. My interpretive program came up blank, so it was either a very little known language or just him trying to talk and fight at the same time. It sounded like he knew what he was saying though. Odd.

The others still hadn’t moved, and the phoenix was dancing back and forth nervously, obviously unable to decide what to do. Looking back over at Derren I noticed he had actually been knocked out somehow while my attention was elsewhere, and was being dragged towards the others.

“Now what are we going to do about this?” said Dlizabeth, putting her fists on her hips.

“I suggest you do nothing,” said a new voice above them. Coming out of the sky was another bizarre looking creature, with red skin, horns, and a forked tail. It also had odd legs, wings, and was wearing a sort of sash and loincloth. It reminded me of the first demon I had seen, back before I decided to watch Elizabeth and her friends develop.

“Are you in charge of these hounds?” asked Dlizabeth.

“Indeed so. And what a motley assortment they’ve found for me, as well. A demon, a phoenix, a couple of kids, and that knocked out follow there. Good dog!” It seemed pleased with this praise and sat up straighter.

“What is your intention, exactly?”

“Oh, we can talk about that. This one-” he pointed to Matt. “I don’t like the looks of him. No, not at all. Let’s get them under control and we can discuss things, my dear. It’s a bit chilly here, allow me to relocate us.”

He started making some odd gestures and chanting, and I noticed a circle of light appeared underneath everyone. I quickly stepped “left” and studied it. I had seen a similar phenomenon the first time I encountered one of these creatures, and took this opportunity to more closely study it. There didn’t seem to be any energy flowing from the creature to the circle, so how was it being generated?

“Extrapolate purpose of energy discharge at this location,” I commanded my armor.

“Given the last utterance of the creature, there is a 90% certainty this energy discharge will be an effective teleportation.”

Just like me to miss the obvious, I should have thought of that. Now, the teleportation, if that’s what it was, wouldn’t take me along in my current state. Neither could I phase back into their reality and go along, the

creature may have some way of knowing how many things got teleported. Also if he can choose who goes, he wouldn't have known to allow me to go with him, and again I would be left behind. Still, I wasn't worried. Even though my brain mapping of Elizabeth was incomplete, it still acted as a beacon for my power. Wherever they went on this planet, I could follow.

I stepped "right" and watched as they vanished, leaving Derren unconscious in the snow. Sam's body was also left there, and I debated doing something about it. That would be a pretty large interference though, something I wanted to avoid. I scanned him- Derren wasn't in danger of dying any time soon, he would probably wake up before it became an issue. With a silent apology for any discomfort he would experience upon waking, I tracked the probe inside Elizabeth and willed myself to its location.

Escape

When you only have a hammer...

I found myself not far from where I had been, though of course distance is a relative term for someone who can cross the universe in the blink of an eye. Still, the scene hadn't changed much. The young humans were still paralyzed, and the creature had apparently just waved the animals away as they were currently backing away though the walls. I was vaguely interested in how they were accomplishing this, but with all the weird things I had seen supposedly biological creatures doing on this world, it didn't surprise me.

"Now we can talk," said the creature, again making those odd gestures.

I'm really going to have to figure out how he's doing that.

Both the creature and Elizabeth vanished.

A moment passed, and it looked like Elizabeth and her friends were coming around. They started looking around wildly. I realized there was no light source operating here, so they must be unable to see anything. Matt however reached up and pulled a chain, energizing an old filament based vacuum tube light source as though he could see perfectly.

"Is everyone all right?" he asked.

"What's going on? What were those things?" whimpered Elizabeth.

"Now, now, you always worry so much. He's gone, let's just get out of here!"

He walked over to a wooden door set in the ceiling, and went to punch it. He acted like he was going to take some big leap and bust right through, but instead he only made a normal jump for a child his age, and banged his fist on the wood.

“Ow!” he yelped, surprised. “What the?”

He tried again and again. “It’s not working.”

Elizabeth concentrated, holding out a hand. “You’re right, we can’t use our powers, apparently.”

“That’s just great. How do we get out, then?” asked Matt.

“I don’t know. Look around for something to stand on or bust this door down.”

“Sorry I got you into this,” Matt said to Iris.

“I’m sorry I let you get into this situation. It’s just those dogs are immune to my fire, and that devil appeared and whisked us away so fast...”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll get out of here.”

The others looked around, but they were basically in some kind of pit, roughly hacked out of the ground. The only real feature apart from some wooden beams holding the ceiling up was the light that had been activated.

“I got nothing,” remarked Sam, going down on all fours. “Stand on my back and see if you can reach that door.”

“It’s going to be locked,” remarked Elizabeth.

“You have any better ideas?”

She didn’t answer him.

Matt went over and stood on him, then gave the door an experimental shove. It moved only a little, and I willed myself to the other side to see how it was secured.

It wasn’t. *That seems rather careless of that creature*, I thought. I also heard the two talking outside the structure I was in, which appeared to be an old wooden “barn,” if my database was correct. I went back down.

“I don’t hear any lock rattling, but I can’t move- wait a second.” Matt strained against the door again, making me wonder if he was just really weak for his age. There is nothing holding that door closed, and checking the density I discovered it was only murdered plant life. Easily liftable, even from below. *Strange*.

“There’s something scratched in the wood here,” he finally said, relaxing. “You know what it reminds me of? Some weird symbols I saw in that kid’s notebook yesterday. One of them said fire. And I’m pretty sure there was one labeled lock. Just a second, Terathel says he knows about this.”

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There was a pause.

“Can you get down then, you're heavy.”

“Sorry, Sam.” He climbed down.

“Okay, he says it's a ward, and there's a lot of things they can do. Everyone look for some more, I'm guessing there's some hidden down here that are keeping us from using our powers.”

The four started looking around, and eventually discovered more symbols scratched into the wooden beams on the ceiling.

“Okay, we found them. Now what?” asks Sam.

“Scratch them out, I guess. But they could be alarmed somehow, so we'll have to move fast once we do.”

“Scratch them out? No problem!” said Sam. “I'll just use my knife of scratching- oh wait I left it back with my *I don't have a knife of scratching.*”

“Calm down, you're as bad as Liz. No offense.”

Elizabeth glared at him.

“There must be something around here...” he trailed off, looking around.

At that moment I... felt something. My armor systems didn't pick anything up, but I swear that there was an energy surge or something in the area I felt I should have been able to identify. It was the oddest thing, because that had never happened to me before. In any case, as I was trying to figure out what it was, it stopped. But before it did, a rock tumbled from the wall and hit the ground, smashing into shard like pieces. I stared at it, as did the others.

“Calculate approximate probability of that happening,” I shakily commanded my armor.

“Zero percent probability.”

“It obviously happened!”

“Unable to adequately explain observed event. More data must be gathered.”

You're telling me.

“Thank you,” whispered Matt to no one in particular. He started handing out rock chunks and outlining his plan.

“We'll try to do it simultaneously, okay? Sam, you get that one nearest the door so you can bust out when we do this.”

“Got it.”

“Everybody ready? On three. One. Two. Three!”

The three young humans and one bird hacked away at the symbols, obliterating them, and my sensors informed me some sort of energy field left the area. Sam ran over and took another running jump at the door, which easily splintered as he rocketed up past it.

“Woo hoo!”

“I guess we've got our powers back,” remarked Elizabeth, holding out her hand again. Her kusarigama appeared, and she closed her fist around it. “Let's go. I have an errant spirit projection to reintegrate.”

They both went over to the door.

“I'm going to throw this chain up, use it to pull us out of here!” she shouted up to Sam, who was looking around for something to drop down to them. She tossed up the weighted end.

“Where did you pull that from?” he asked as he caught it.

“Never you mind.” She put her foot on the blade and grabbed Matt, holding him close under the arm. He wrapped the chain around his other hand and grabbed Elizabeth, turning red. “We're ready.”

Sam gave a heave and the two zipped out of the hole, and they stumbled upright again, looking around. Liz took her chain back, but held it ready, swinging the weighted end around in one hand. The phoenix also flew free, and started looking around.

“You know how to use that?” Sam asked, gesturing to the chain.

“A little,” she admitted. “I didn't want to be totally helpless, after all.”

“There's the door,” said Matt, pointing to the main door of the barn. “Let's go.”

They didn't get half way there when the original two animals walked through the wall again, in addition to two more from the other side, flanking them.

“Oh no!” said Elizabeth, “We are so dead.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” shouted Sam, rushing the closest one.

In his excitement he didn't really take the time to try and be accurate, and predictably missed. The phoenix winged over and tried to distract it, hitting but hardly doing any damage to it. Elizabeth closed her eyes and give a shriek, and a barrier sprang into existence around her and Matt. I couldn't help but notice her physical reactions showing how terrified she was, and it showed in her barrier. I had seen her create much better ones in practice, this one would hardly stop a... what was that Earth creature? A rabbit!

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Matt started the procedure he used to send the creatures in his school away that one night, and Elizabeth cracked her eyes open and looked over at him. She probably didn't know what exactly he was doing, but she started copying him anyway.

One of the creatures tried to jump through the barrier, and I stepped "left" to think if I should do anything. It was obviously going to get through, that barrier was terrible. But if she failed now, she would lose confidence and maybe not practice anymore. Also... she could die. Then I would have to go find someone else to observe, which would be a huge hassle. I decided to help out a little, and added energy to the spot it was about to jump through. Stepping "right" to about 50% synchronization with their timestream, I watched with satisfaction as it bounced off.

Meanwhile, Sam had dispatched one of the creatures, and was currently pummeling a second.

The other two were focused on the barrier, and the one that bounced off now tried a fire attack. Matt stepped in front of Elizabeth, making me wonder if he had some plan in mind, so I let it go through this time to see what would happen. To my surprise the fire just sort of fizzled out as it reached him, and he looked smug. He continued calling upon the forces of Heaven to drive the demons out.

The second one charged through the barrier but a figure appeared around Matt and deflected it, then disappeared again. *Ah, his so called angel*, I thought.

Matt gave a loud shout and some kind of power flowed out of him, again, somehow familiar to me in some way, and one of the creatures vanished. A second later Liz did the same and there was only one of the creatures left. Sam swiftly dispatched it, and turned to run towards the door. He got about half way there when a spear of fire smashed the door down and headed straight for him.

I decreased my synchronization again and walked over to it.

"Calculate the total energy concentration in this projection," I told my armor.

It displayed a number on my visor. *That's going to kill him*, I thought. Now I had a choice to make- did I let it, or again step in, changing his fate? I walked around him several times, thinking. Then I had a sudden inspiration and looked out the door. I was right, it was Elizabeth that was generating the fire. What would happen to Elizabeth when she learned it was her inner demon that killed her friend? She had enough trouble calling it out this first time, a blow like this could make it impossible to call out again.

She might even reject her powers all together, and I needed to study her development if I was going to accurately judge this world. *So I guess I need to save him somehow. The question is, she was firing blind, how did she know she wouldn't hit, and kill, Elizabeth? That would have ended her existence as well. You would think she would be more careful about that sort of thing.*

I walked back over to the gout of flame and considered my options. Obviously it would need to hit him- anything else would cause considerable questions. Matt had his guardian angel and that weird ability the pale guy told him about. Fire hitting him and doing no damage could be explained. Sam had no such protection. In the end I simply absorbed most of the energy myself, letting the rest hit Sam and knock him backwards into a piece of farm equipment. I stepped back closer to real time.

"Hey, that was a lucky shot!" exclaimed Elizabeth as she and the devil stepped into the room. "Aw, he's not dead!"

Sam was frantically beating his arm where it had caught on fire. He got it out and shakily stood up, looking bruised but still able to fight.

"Stop it right now!" shouted Elizabeth.

"We need to take this one out, so stay out of it," she replied.

The devil started doing his gesture thing again, and a circle of light appeared under Elizabeth. Bands of force appeared around her, which she struggled against and busted out of with a roar.

It looked like the demon didn't expect that, he looked surprised. "Then I'll try this!" he shouted, raising his hands again.

"Don't kill her, you know what that would mean for me!" snapped Elizabeth.

"Oh, right," he replied, crestfallen.

"Look," said Elizabeth, addressing Elizabeth. "He's told me everything that's going on. You have to believe me when I say that Sam is too dangerous to let live. These dogs you killed, they were there to protect you while we sorted things out. You don't realize it but Sam is very dangerous. Please don't interfere, and I'll tell you what I can later, okay?"

"No," said Elizabeth dangerously. "This has gone on long enough."

She concentrated, and a look of terror came into Elizabeth's eyes. "She's trying to take control again. Help me!"

The devil seemed to think for a moment, but before he could do anything, Elizabeth gave a shout of despair and began shimmering and changing. Suddenly the ant was back, and looking daggers at the demon. He looked around, suddenly without his support.

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“Uh...” he said uncertainly.

Sam charged him with a roar and Matt started his banishment prayer again, but Elizabeth held up a hand. “Don’t kill him,” she shouted, “if we capture him we can get him to tell us the whole plan!”

A brief scuffle ensued but the demon took to the air as the ant fired energy beams at him, aiming for his arms. He got hit, but not enough damage was done to stop his gesturing and he disappeared.

“Crap!” said Sam, punching the ground and cracking it. “We should have just killed him.”

“No, he’s out there somewhere. We’ll find him,” said Matt. “We need to find out what’s going on.”

“We have to get back to the school, Derren was hurt, I think!” said Elizabeth.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here before he’s back with more of those dog things. Where are we anyway?” asked Matt.

“I think... yeah, I pass this place on the way to school. We’re not too far away, let’s go!”

“I can be seen, so I should probably return to Heaven,” said Iris. “I’m sorry I wasn’t much help. Everything you fought was immune to fire.”

“You helped out,” said Sam. “You distracted that one so I could get a good hit in.”

“May I call upon you again?” asked Matt.

“But of course. I don’t mind a bit of excitement now and again.”

“Thank you.”

A moment later the phoenix disappeared, and the three young humans made their way quickly back to the forest behind the school. They reached it without difficulty, and as they ran up to where they had left, they saw several members of Zephyr standing around arguing about what to do now.

“Wait, there they are!” yelled Derren, pointing. “They’re okay after all!” He seemed genuinely relieved, which was more emotion than I’d noticed him display up until now.

Interesting.

“What happened, are you all right?” asked one of the others.

“We’re fine. Sam took some fire to the face, but it didn’t seem to slow him down much.”

Not a problem.

“That’s a relief,” said Derren. “Guess we don’t have to go looking for you after all.” He turned to the others. “I’ll finish up here. It looks like someone is stepping up the game, we’ll have to be extra careful.”

“Agreed,” said the third Zephyr member. “We can talk later.”

They left, and Derren got the full story of what happened to them.

“I’m pretty impressed,” he said when the explanation was done. “You really handled yourself well.”

“Sam did, anyway,” remarked Elizabeth.

“Now, now, it sounds like you all played a part. I’m proud of you. And getting your demon under control is something to be proud of. So this is your spirit projection?” He gestured to the ant.

“I guess. It hasn’t said much.”

“No, they don’t talk when they’re out here, for some reason. You might as well dismiss him-”

“Her.”

“Sorry. Dismiss her, I doubt that demon will be back today after the beating you gave him.”

“Yeah, about that. How exactly?”

“Oh yeah, you’ve never projected it before! Silly of me. I’m told it’s like a muscle inside yourself. Just... relax that muscle. Feel it out.”

Elizabeth stood and looked at nothing for a moment. “I guess I do feel a certain tightness inside myself. Let’s see...” Suddenly the ant shimmered and was gone. “Oh.”

“See? Nothing too it.”

“So what happens now?”

“You’re officially a shaman, so we’ll get you into the shaman ‘class’ with the others. You’ll have to alternate between the two of us, which is fine. But that’s for tomorrow. For now, go home, rest, and be proud! You took on a dangerous situation and lived to tell about it. That says a lot about your future potential. After all you’ve only had powers less than a month. Think what you could do in a year!”

“Oh, before I forget,” said Elizabeth. “This demon and Elizabeth talked for a while. Is there any way to force her to tell me what they talked about? Of course she could lie, but there must be ways around that.”

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Derren thought for a moment. “Could be dangerous. We could put her behind a barrier that cancels out her powers, and a seer could tell if she was lying, but forcing the truth out of her? That could backfire. Let’s say we got her out into an area where her powers didn’t work, right? Then some spirit hunters held her down and put wards on her or whatever to make her talk. All well and good, but that would turn her against you even more than she already is. She’s an unknown factor, but at least she doesn’t have any specific grudges against you right now. There are safer ways to learn what he’s about, so we’ll see what we can learn without resorting to that for the time being.”

“Okay, I just thought I would mention it in case there was an easy way.”

“She’s a part of your soul, so it’s a little tricky.”

“I can see that being true. Oh well.”

So they said their goodbyes and caught the bus home, where Elizabeth went up to her room to think about all she had experienced. She took a hidden book from behind some other books on her bookshelf, the one she didn’t want her siblings or her mother to find. I had noticed she kept a sort of journal that she had “hidden” in an obvious place. Into this book she wrote mundane things about school or boys. After she had gotten powers though, she had started using this second book to record her thoughts about that.

So I helped kill a bunch of creatures today. Dog demons I guess. Should I feel glad there are fewer demons in the world, or sad because even they had a right to live? I was defending myself, and Sam did all the actual killing. I just emulated what Matt did, and I’m not too clear on exactly what he’s doing when he sends demons away. It worked, which I’m happy about because I get to keep living.

Should I talk to my mom about this? I’d love to tell her everything, but she would probably just forbid me to learn any more. Maybe that would be a nice excuse? But given the potential I have that X keeps talking about, they would probably just modify her memory like they implied and keep training me. I look at Ivy and Zack, they have no idea what I’m going through right now. I think mom suspects something after all those weird things happened after the dance, but she hasn’t said anything. I’m not exactly lying to her by not telling her, but it feels like it. What if one day I don’t come back, and X has to come tell her “your daughter was a demon fighter. Too bad she wasn’t a better one or she would be alive right now.”

Doesn't she have the right to know I'm risking my life like this? I don't want to, but when strange things happen to me and I'm forced into it, what else can I do?

I can't exactly talk to my school councilor about this either. Who can I talk to? X would just say "suck it up girly!" I'm just so afraid that once I learn to kill, I'll be asked to. After Dee died, I wanted revenge so badly, I thought, yeah, I'll learn spirit energist powers and avenge her! But the next day I realized, when will it end? Once I kill for myself, someone like X saying "we need this person dead" won't give me much pause at all. Then after that it'll be a little easier, and a little easier, until I don't even think about it at all. And then I'll be gone, replaced by just a walking power that someone else can order around.

Is this all my power is good for? Death? Destroying things? Even refusing to learn that energy beam didn't help, and Sam could have died! Do I have to become dangerous to protect my friends? I called out my spirit projection and spirits are supposed to help a shaman, X said. Maybe now I can talk to them and get some insights about what I'm supposed to do with these powers I find myself with.

Interesting, I thought. Who needs a neural implant to see what someone's thinking when they write their thoughts on paper? Still, the mapping should be done by tomorrow, and we'll see what she really thinks about all this.

Slippery Slope

*“I fell down, down, down, into a
burning ring of fire.” – Johnny Cash*

The next morning my implant began working so I could take a peek into Elizabeth’s head when I felt it was important enough. She’s looking forward to meeting the other shaman students but annoyed at having to wait almost the whole day to do it. It’s a fair point, unless Zephyr thinks these powers are just temporary, wouldn’t it be a much better use of resources to end their “traditional” education? Obviously, nearly all the population is powerless, so those with abilities are probably going to wind up using them to earn their way in life. So shouldn’t that become the main focus of their study?

But on the other hand, if Zephyr thought these powers were not permanent, why train them at all? Just seal their powers away so they can’t accidentally hurt someone (there must be a way to do this, I reasoned) and don’t even bother wasting all this time training. It was quite confusing to me. I knew that powers could be suppressed temporarily, I had seen that in action just the day before. And given even a small population of people with powers, at least some of them would turn to a “life of crime” as these humans phrased it. The normal authorities wouldn’t be able to deal with a spirit hunter, for example, who started robbing banks- thus some means would have to be found to deal with rogue elements. Of course the justice system used by people with powers could be much more harsh, given the level of responsibly bestowed on those with powers. Anyone stepping out of line might just be killed outright. Which would have been a shame, given how few people had powers.

But maybe that was the point? See if someone had the discipline to get through “school” before their “real” training began? If someone couldn’t sit through trigonometry and get a passing grade, for instance, how would they have the patience to create a talisman that took a hundred hours? I admit I was seeing their cultural decisions from a unique perspective, and I didn’t know their history. Maybe they had tried it my way and it hadn’t worked out. That sort of history wouldn’t be found in any book, so I felt my ignorance in that area would remain.

In any case, Elizabeth got through the day and Derren took her to be introduced to the shaman teacher, a female named Marina. I found this name to be somewhat ironic, given that her guardian spirit was that of a shark.

“It’s nice to meet you!” Marina bubbled, after introducing everyone in the class. “Glad you could join us. We’re looking forward to seeing what a spirit energist shaman can do! I heard you had some trouble up to this point?”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Elizabeth admitted. “I hope you’ve been told about my... condition.”

“Yes, don’t worry. We won’t ask you to call your spirit projection out unless we take special precautions. We’re working on the best way to teach you to get it under control, but it’ll mostly come down to how much work you want to put into it.”

“If it means Elizabeth won’t be a danger, I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She nodded. “Good.” She turned to the rest of the young humans. “Now why don’t you all bring out your spirit projections and introduce them, and we’ll go over what we’ve been talking about these past couple of weeks.”

With some struggle the four other students in the room called out their energy forms, and there was a fair disparity in their appearance. For example, Marina’s shark took the form of a watery creature that stood upright, with a row of sharp teeth and a mouth for a midsection. In fact, looking around I noticed that the other energy forms were much more humanlike than the ant I had seen when Elizabeth got hers under control. Was this just a random occurrence, or did it have a special meaning? Could she be “further away” in some sense from her energy form, causing it to manifest more like an animal than a human? Or was it just closer to nature

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and thus took a more natural form? Sadly, Elizabeth didn't ask so had I no idea what, if anything, it meant.

"As a shaman," explained Marina, "You are the bridge between the spirit world and the human world. So your primary ability is to call down the assistance of spirits, which will help you in a variety of ways. Let's take Elizabeth's ant spirit, for example: Ants are very colony minded, they help each other out. If you summon the spirit of the ant, you'll be better able to help out others, even if you don't know exactly how to do the thing you're helping with. The spirit will guide you to make suggestions or improvements so you'll just have to learn to trust it. As that seems to be your totem spirit, the spirit most like you, you'll be able to do that any time. Try it out and you'll see!"

"Wow, that's amazing. So yours is shark?"

"Exactly, you could tell because my spirit projection was shark like. That, and I told you earlier!"

The class laughed.

"But seriously, because of that I have a better sense of smell and I can breathe underwater. If you summon the spirit of the shark, you can have those abilities too. For a while. Figure about ten minutes for every minute you spend chanting. We'll get into that. For now just remember there are a lot of different spirits you can call on, and they all can help you in different ways. Now, being in tune with the spirit world means you also have some control over demons in our world. Specifically, you can banish them back to the Demon World, or drive them out of someone if they are being possessed. So I would call the four main abilities of the shaman to project their guardian spirit, call on the aid of nature spirits, send demons away, and end possession. Now without any demons to practice on, that could be tricky to learn, but I can tell you the theory."

She paused.

"Whew. That's the basics! There are some other techniques like allowing your projection to get further from you, or bringing out more power in your projections, but you should learn the basics first. Anyone have any questions?"

Everyone looked around at everyone else.

"Okay. Why don't you pick out a spirit from this list, Elizabeth, and we'll go over the exact procedure? Emily, you seem the best at it so far, why don't you explain it?"

“Okay, first...”

The class went on, and Elizabeth seemed much more into it than in her spirit energist class. I tuned into my probe to see what she was thinking.

This is the kind of thing I want to learn! These spirits, if that’s what they really are, sound super useful! And no blowing stuff up! Stupid Elizabeth! Why did you have to be part of my soul??? I could have been learning this stuff weeks ago now.

To my surprise, I heard a different voice in Elizabeth’s head when she said that!

If you hadn’t been afraid of me at the beginning, and helped me fight off that ant instead of working against me, yes, you would have. Calling spirits? Ha! What good is that going to do you, in the end? Only through me can you realize your desires for power. I know it is within you, otherwise, I wouldn’t exist. Admit it, playing pranks is fun, but one day you’re going to need my power. You don’t even know what’s out there yet- creatures far stronger than me exist, and in great numbers. When you are watching your friends perish at their hands, you’ll curse the day you turned away from me. But don’t worry, I’ll always be here. All you have to do is ask...

Elizabeth, frozen as the voice began, stumbled.

“Are you okay?” asked Marina, concerned.

“Yes, just some unexpected inner dialog with my pet. Nothing to be concerned about.”

Marina just looked worried.

What was I saying? Man, she can actually talk to me now? Great, I’ll never get any peace. Oh yeah, I can banish demons too? Maybe I can get a good answer about what happens to them when Matt does it, the technique sounds similar.

Their activities came to a close for that day when the busses arrived to take them home, and Elizabeth had chosen the moon spirit to study first. Apparently a spirit of love and change, I could see how she would be drawn to it first. Her life was changing rapidly, so it was probably the case she

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hoped to get advice about it. The spirit could also allow you to become insubstantial, which I was looking forward to seeing.

Apparently each spirit could also influence someone under its effects physically or mentally, making you stronger or faster. Each spirit, like mountain making you tougher, could change a single aspect of a person. moon was special in that, when it was called, you could decide what aspect of yourself you wanted to enhance. All in all, a very versatile spirit.

From what Marina said, Elizabeth picked up the ritual very quickly, but still questioned herself and believed she was doing it wrong. This of course made it fail, not because she was doing it wrong, but because she didn't believe it would work. Interesting...

Another day passed, and coming in that morning, Elizabeth and her two friends received notices to meet that afternoon in a different place than usual. Apparently Derren had something special in mind for them. They speculated on what it was, but had to wait until classes were over to actually find out. They approached him outside the school building.

"Good afternoon!" he called to them.

They made their greetings and asked what this was all about.

"It's about that demon you guys tangled with Monday. We've found out he's actually living in that house next to the barn you guys showed up in. Pretty stupid of him not to move on at this point, but there it is."

"So what does that have to do with us?" asked Matt.

"Zephyr feels you guys are ready to deal with him, so that's your next mission!"

"Deal with," Elizabeth said, slowly. Sam looked excited, but she just looked very, very troubled. "You mean capture, right? So you can figure out his plans? But he can teleport... oh, can you take his powers like he did ours?"

"Actually, by deal with I mean kill."

"I was afraid of that."

"You have a problem with it?"

"Yeah, a big problem! This is why I don't want to learn destructive techniques! Because I knew someday I would be forced to use them, like right now. *And I don't want to become a killer.*"

"It's just a demon," said Sam.

"I don't care what it is," retorted Elizabeth. "Sure, today it's a demon. But what about tomorrow? Will it be a person we know is hanging out with demons? And then the next day when we merely suspect someone is involved with demons?"

“She has a point,” hedged Matt. “Terathel tells me about the horrible things demons are capable of so I have no problem getting rid of it. But shouldn’t we at least try to capture it somehow?”

Derren shook his head. “We’ve used other means to learn everything he could have told us. It’s too dangerous to leave him just living there, looking like the person he killed and replaced.”

“He did what?” said Sam.

“I’m afraid it’s true. He’s killed the farm owner and taken his place.”

“Oh, great! So then we get to bust in there and make him go poof. Someone notices he’s not around anymore and calls the cops. They investigate, and someone comes forward telling a story about how they saw three kids matching our descriptions going into the house a few days ago. Then they come knocking at our doors and we’re suspects in a murder trial!”

“You do seem to have a morbid streak, don’t you?”

“I’m just being realistic!”

“How is that scenario realistic?”

“I guess it is, in a way,” put in Matt. “Right now people think he’s still there. When he’s gone, someone will investigate. The murderer will already be dead, killed by us. But the only leads they’ll have will be us. We’ll have to wear gloves if we go in there...”

“Don’t worry, everything will be taken care of.”

“So do us a favor and take care of him now,” said Elizabeth. “Don’t ask a bunch of middle school kids to do your killing for you.”

“But it’s a demon!” protested Sam.

“Shut up, I know it’s a demon!”

“Guys, please! Look, the truth is Zephyr can’t handle everything. We need every person with powers we can get just to hold our own around here, so we need to get you all trained up, and fast. I’m sorry about that, but it’s the only way. Things are going on, you know that. We need to get to the bottom of it before worse things start happening. But to do that we need your help. Now if you want to sit it out, Elizabeth, that’s fine, but I think Sam is going to go if you do or not.”

I think in the time they spent arguing about it, Derren could probably have just gone over there and taken care of the whole situation. Though he was knocked out pretty easily by that dog thing... maybe he has a weak constitution? My scans didn’t mention anything like that though. Strange, is he just a coward? Or worse, is he trying to get them killed?

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She looked over at Sam, who was nodding vigorously.

“Demons don’t belong here,” he said. “And I’m sure he’s done worse than killing one farmer. He doesn’t deserve to exist.”

“You’re the authority on that, now, are you? Fine, just... give me twenty minutes to make sure I’ve got this moon spirit thing down. If you’re going to throw us to the wolves, I want to make sure we can at least get away if we need to.”

“That’s fine,” allowed Derren. “A spirit’s help would come in handy I’m sure. And we’re not just throwing you to the wolves, we’ll be watching in case something goes wrong, and we’ll step in if needed. But you have to learn you can do things for yourselves. This is just the beginning.”

That’s what I’m afraid of, thought Elizabeth.

Beginning of what? I thought.

They waited while Elizabeth went over the notes she had made the night before. Finally she stood up and declared she was ready, and started chanting. She chanted for three minutes, and I felt her put a lot of her energy into the end, and she brightened.

“It worked!” she exclaimed, surprised. She went over to a tree, concentrated, and her hand passed right through.

I missed my chance to scan that! I thought. *Oh well, they’ll do it again.*

I hastily set up additional probe units and started them scanning; if a battle was going to take place, I wanted to be ready to analyze every second of it.

“Okay, let’s go.”

A Farmer's Life

Plowing, Tilling, the farmer's life for me!

While the trio walked to the farmhouse, Elizabeth and the others made plans on how they were going to carry out this assault. I was actually rather surprised Elizabeth was going through it at all, given her dislike of violence. I shouldn't have worried.

"So here's the plan," she explained.

"Who made you leader?" asked Sam.

"I did. If you had your way you would just bust the door down, rush in there, and punch the guy in the face."

"Well, yeah!"

"Exactly. If Zephyr's information is wrong, you just committed murder."

"They wouldn't be wrong. Would they?"

"I can make a chain appear out of thin air. You think there isn't some power in the world that can redirect seeing or whatever it is you call what seers can do?"

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to be sure."

"Glad you're seeing things my way. I'm more than a little disturbed that you would just take what they say entirely on faith and go kill some guy, but whatever. That's why you have me around. I'm going to go talk to him. If he isn't a demon, we leave him alone. If he is, I want to see if he'll talk to me, as I'm the nearest thing to a demon around here. I mean he's not talking to you Matt, if you really are a petitioner."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Are you sure you want to do it alone though?" Matt asked, concerned.

"I'll go insubstantial if he tries anything. It's fine. Anyway, meanwhile

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you guys are going to be sneaking in through the back, so I'll have backup if I need it right away. After he reveals himself, and not before," she glared hard at Sam, "you can come in and make with the violence."

"Okay."

"Good luck."

The two males went around the back of the house, while Elizabeth gave them a moment to get into position. She rang the doorbell and waited. While she did I scanned the house, and got some curious energy readings running through the walls of the structure. A man looked out the window at her, then came to the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Elizabeth put on a big smile. "Wow, I hope so. I'm really sorry to bother you like this, but I'm doing a project for school on local barns in the area. Do you think I could film the inside of your barn over the weekend, and maybe ask you some questions about it? I just hate to see so many falling apart out on the outskirts of the city. It's great to see one being maintained!"

Clever girl. You made up a whole story to have an excuse to talk to him, and see if he would recognize you or just attack. This way if he isn't a demon... you aren't just standing there with a blank look on your face.

"I'm afraid it wouldn't be ready in time for this weekend," he replied. "There was some groundwater damage a few days ago and part of the floor collapsed. To be honest I'll probably have to hire somebody to make sure it's safe even for me to go into. If it wasn't for that, I would have been happy to help. Always glad to see you young people getting interested in your neighborhood."

Elizabeth's face fell. "Aw, that's too bad. I hope it isn't too hard to get fixed. It would be a shame to have to knock the barn down to redo the whole foundation. Well, I won't take any more of your time. Sorry again for bothering you!"

"Don't worry about it. Have a nice day."

He closed the door. Elizabeth just looked confused.

Okay, so is he a demon or not? she thought.

“Psst!”

Huh?

Sam and Matt were keeping low and motioning her over around the house. She ducked down and went over to them.

“You guys shouldn’t be out here, you’re supposed to be inside,” she protested.

“We couldn’t get in, he must have the house covered by those weird symbol things.”

“Well, shoot. And he seemed normal enough when I talked to him.”

“Oh, he’s a demon all right. We saw him change from the back window into that farmer dude.”

“Great? So, now what? I do want to talk to him and see if he’ll tell us anything. Even if what he says will be suspect, it would be more than Zephyr’s told us.”

“I say we just take him out.”

“He must have recognized you,” put in Matt. “If he’s smart he’s long gone by now.”

“But that’s just the thing. He’s still here, days after trying to kill us. Either he has no fear of us, and why should he, or he’s set up shop here and can’t leave.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“Get him out here again. You’ve seen *Home Alone*, right? Do you want to go through his house to find him with who knows what traps set up?”

“No, not particularly.”

“Okay then.”

She walked over and rang the bell again, and once again the man opened the door.

“Was there something else?”

“Look, my friends saw you change, so drop the act. We’re just here to talk anyway, so can we keep this civil?”

“I don’t think you came here on your own just to talk. I think you were sent here to kill me.”

“You’re right, we were sent here to kill you. But *I* came here to talk to you.”

“I’m supposed to believe that?”

“I’m standing here making mouth music and not the Sam Pummels Your Face Until You Die sonata, aren’t I?”

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“Look, what do you want?”

“I want to know what’s going on around here! You seemed to convince Elizabeth (she says hi, by the way) it was essential Sam here be killed, I want to know why. I want to know why I have these weird powers now, and why I’m being trained as some sort of supernatural assassin. You know what’s going on, at least you implied that you do, and as loathe as I am to admit it, you’re probably our best bet for finding out the truth.”

“Did you ever consider your being kept in the dark was deliberate?”

“Yeah. And now I want your telling me what I want to know to be deliberate.”

“Go away.” The demon (man?) started to close the door, but Elizabeth snapped her fingers. “Sam,” she commanded.

“Finally,” he breathed, and smashed the door down.

This pinned the man under the debris, and he shimmered and became the creature I had seen earlier. My probes recorded the event and I eagerly watched to see what the three would do.

Elizabeth immediately put up a barrier as two more of those four legged creatures came into view, and Sam leapt in the air to come down and punch the demon. I noticed with interest this barrier had a bit more cohesion than the last, but still wasn’t what I would call her best work. The demon narrowly avoided the blow by vanishing in a puff of smoke, which was followed by Elizabeth disappearing in a similar one. I wasn’t worried I would miss any of the action, my probe was recording everything Elizabeth did, and watched as Sam crashed through the floor and into the basement.

That guy really needs to learn the word restraint, I thought, but I actually better make sure Elizabeth is all right. I willed myself to Elizabeth’s side again. After all, it would be inconvenient for me if she was killed and I could have prevented it. The demon seemed oddly off balance, but Elizabeth looked determined. I realized I hadn’t actually gone very far, this was still the same house. I did notice her barrier was gone. Couldn’t she maintain it though the teleport, or did her copycat power negate anything she could do while she used that ability?

“That was a dangerous thing to do,” sneered the demon. “What are you going to do all by yourself?”

He started chanting and waving his hands about, and a circle of light appeared underneath Elizabeth. Undaunted, she began to mimic him, and an identical circle appeared under the demon. He stopped, and both faded away.

“Huh.”

“Now you have your answer,” Elizabeth said. “I’m going to do to you whatever you do to me.”

“That’s an interesting power you have there,” he said, making sure her barrier was gone. “But you can’t mimic this!” He swung at her, hoping to tear into her with his claws, but a new smaller barrier appeared which he bounced off of. He snarled in frustration, rubbing his hand, which looked hurt.

You know, I could take him out for you easily, I heard that odd voice in Elizabeth’s head say to her. Just let me out before you get us both killed.

Shut up, I’m trying to concentrate.

The devil, looking for weak spots in the barrier, managed to get a claw through and tore a hole for himself. He lunged for her, and I stepped “left,” coming to 0% temporal sync with them.

Looking at the angle of the attack and calculating his velocity, plus the hardness of those claws... she’s in for a bad time. I looked them both over. *She was doing pretty well, too.* I considered, then looked down at where the demon’s foot was going to land next. Reaching down I tapped the wood, and a tiny sliver of my armor slid off and settled there. I made it nearly frictionless, and stepped “right” again to speed up the action. As I calculated, the tiny patch of floor now covered with my armor threw off his balance just enough for Elizabeth to skirt out of his way. While she did so, her chain appeared, and she wrapped it around his neck and began to tighten it.

Rather than struggling, as I expected, the demon instead reached up and grabbed one of Elizabeth’s hands, and my sensors registered some sort of power coming from him. Whatever it was it didn’t seem to do much, Elizabeth just tightened the chain.

Forget that, said the voice. Even you can’t miss at this range, practice or not. Just blow his head off with your energy attack and be done with it. You don’t need training to generate it, just to aim it, you know?

I won’t do it!

So you’ll strangle him instead? How is that better?

I’m hoping the others get here and think of something before he dies!

I’m just saying.

The demon tried again, but again failed, and at that moment, Sam came barreling into the room, screaming “Get away from her!” He knocked the demon to the floor.

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“Oh, this is much better!” exclaimed the demon. He reached up to grab Sam, and Elizabeth got a horrified look on her face. Even slowed down, what happened next was quite startling, even to me. As the demon grinned in triumph, Elizabeth’s hand came down on Sam and something started to happen. But just as it did, a beam of energy smashed through the window, angling downwards. It struck the demon in the face and tore his head off, making his body disintegrate into fine particles.

When the afterimage cleared, Elizabeth was gone... and my probe wasn’t functioning anymore. I looked around, confused, then stepped over the tiny sliver of armor I had released, reintegrating it. *Can’t let them see that.*

Matt was standing, looking stunned at the sudden disappearance of his friend, when suddenly the spirit hunter they had met on the roof of the school took the window out the rest of the way as she sailed into the room.

“That was close!” she exclaimed. “It would have been a disaster if he had possessed you, Sam. Hey, were’s that girl?”

Exactly what I want to know.

“I saw the whole thing,” remarked Matt. “When you killed the demon she disappeared too. You don’t think she was trying to mimic his powers and got killed the same as him, do you?”

“That would be unlikely,” she replied, looking around. “I do know a technique, but it takes a while. Give me five minutes.”

The others stood and watched her chant for several minutes. She finally came out of it again.

“Yup, somehow she’s managed to possess you, Sam.”

“Possess me? What does that mean? Liz? Are you here? Give me some sign, anything!”

Suddenly Sam started slapping his own face and crying “Stop hitting yourself.”

Sam seemed to snap out of something. “What the!?! Okay, that was weird. I guess I see what you mean about me and possession.”

“So how do we get her out of there?” asked Matt.

“Let’s just hope it wears off,” replied Rosalitta. “We can forcibly eject her, at least there are powers that can do it. Unless you’ve learned how to do that, Matt?”

Matt shook his head. “No way to practice that.”

“I figured.”

Okay, so did Elizabeth just somehow go inside Sam? I thought. How is that even possible? Energy beams is one thing, but this violates so many laws of the universe I can’t even begin to list them all. My armor started to list them all for me. That wasn’t a request, it’s fine. The list disappeared.

“As long as we know she’s here I can tell you guys why I came back. It wasn’t to kill that demon, as fortunate as my timing was.”

“Yeah, thanks for that. Sorry I was so useless,” Matt said, ashamed.

“You’re not a direct fighter, don’t worry about it. Anyway, I have to tell you, spirit hunter society has basically written you all off and is now gathering forces to come and kill every person here that got powers.”

“What?” shouted Matt. “They can do that?”

“There is some concern over the ‘media backlash’ in the supernatural community if the plan goes forward, but that’s basically their thinking right now. They feel with all the demonic presences here, and the manner in which you all got your powers, it basically corrupted you all. Except for yourself and Sam here, who are both holy in nature.”

“Oh, that’s some comfort,” sneered Matt. “I get to bury half my class. We’ve got to do something about this!”

“That’s why I came to get you. I think if you two speak on behalf of your classmates, you might be able to sway them. Or at least buy yourselves some time? The society is very much a “kill them all and let God sort them out” kind of organization. I’m not sure if anything can be changed at this point, but it’s your best shot.”

At that moment, Elizabeth seemed to be forcibly ejected from Sam’s body, and staggered around the room dizzily.

“Okay... that- where- AARG!”

“Deep breaths, it’ll pass. You heard all that?”

“Yes. Never doing that again. You okay Sam?”

“Yeah, I guess. You were in my head?”

“Sorry. It was the only thing I could think of to do. He tried doing

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something to me, so I figured he would do the same to you. I thought if we both tried it, either we would both be inside and fight for control, or I could push him out by going in. Didn't matter in the end, but..."

"Hey, it was a good idea, at the time."

"Come on, if we're going, let's go!"

"Just a minute! First, I'm glad you're all okay," said Elizabeth. "Second, let's fix up the door Sam busted down so someone doesn't walk by, see it, and call the cops. Then we can go."

They did that, then gathered around Rosalita. As she started chanting, I picked up a strong thought from Elizabeth.

I seriously hope we didn't just get suckered into willingly going with a kidnapper. Where's Zephyr, anyway? Weren't they supposed to be watching us in case we got in trouble? He's just letting us leave, so either that was a lie and they aren't, or he doesn't want to get involved in this and is just waiting to see what happens?

She has the most cheerful thoughts.

Spirit Hunters Step In
Ew, what did you step in?

I willed myself to her location after she disappeared and found myself in a long room. What the humans called a “boardroom” I believed. There were a couple of people at the far end, and Rosalita told the three to stay there while she went and set up the meeting. Sam and Matt were looking around with interest, but I think the stress of what had been happening started catching up to Elizabeth.

“Are you all right?” asked Matt, as she started trembling and leaned heavily against one of the chairs.

“It’s all happening so fast,” she replied. “Attacking a demon? What was Zephyr thinking? We’re just kids. He wanted to kill me. Nothing’s ever really wanted to kill me before. And he almost did. I mean those dog things I can accept, they’re just animals. But this was a living, thinking being. That was trying its hardest to snuff out my life. How can you not be affected by that?”

“I didn’t see very much,” Matt admitted. “You disappeared, then I banished one of the hellhounds while Sam took out the other. Then he ran off calling for you. By the time I got into the room, Rosalita had taken him out. I was trying to get Iris here, so I was concentrating on that too.”

“Oh. You’re lucky then. Plus, wasn’t Zephyr supposed to be watching the place, ready to step in if something happened? They not only didn’t step in, they let Miss spirit hunter here stand there for five minutes chanting, then make off with us once I came back out of Sam!”

“I have the memories of my past life,” said Sam, seemingly only half listening. “Sometimes I’ll see something, or hear something, and it’ll remind

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me of stuff I've done before I... died. Like Deja Vu, only I know I've done it before. Or at least, my soul has.”

“Not sure how that’s relevant, Sam. We've been whisked off to who-knows-where to try and plead for our lives! Try to keep up.”

“I know. I hope coming here wasn’t a mistake. But Rosalita sounded like they were poised to attack any minute, so...”

She came back over. “You okay?”

“I will be, just give me a minute.”

“The council will see you now, so I’m afraid you don’t have much time.”

“I guess you get to do the talking for now,” said Elizabeth, trying to smile. “But I will tell you one thing. My ant spirit, it gives me a special power- the Power of Assist. Basically I can help anyone do anything. So if I suggest a course of action or whisper to tell them something or leave something out, it’s the ant in me talking, and not just me.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The four filed into the next room that was set up with a small stage and some tables. Three severe looking people were seated on the stage and others were drifting in or were already seated, looking at them. One female and two males, all about middle age, seemed to be in the central position, and thus I believed them to be in charge of the proceedings.

So these are the people that are about to go and slaughter innocent children, I thought. Funny, they don’t look like demons, but their hearts certainly aren’t human.

Elizabeth heavily sat down and closed her eyes, probably preparing a meditation exercise to try and calm herself.

“Is she all right?” said the woman.

“She just survived her first demon attack, give her a minute.”

“You came straight from that?” said the man on the left.

“This is all highly irregular.” said the man on the right.

“We live in interesting times,” said Rosalita with a hint of a smile.

“Yes, well. You're here, and we're willing to listen to you, though you've come uninvited. Rosalita doesn’t actually have the authority to... Anyway, please tell us everything you've learned about this incident.”

Matt looked over at Sam, who shrugged and gestured for him to go ahead.

Rather hesitantly at first, and with some help from Elizabeth, Matt told his personal account of events starting with the dance. He had to be corrected on several points by Elizabeth, it seemed her memory of the events was a bit sharper than his, probably because she wrote things down in her secret journal. Also he didn't know what the others had been doing in their "classes" so they took over the telling of those parts. Finally he finished, caught up to the last hour.

"That relates your personal accounts of what happened, no doubt valuable information, but doesn't answer our question. We need to know what you've found out about what happened."

He looked to the others. "We're as much in the dark as anyone," he replied. "We've only had powers for—"

"Eighteen days," put in Elizabeth.

"Eighteen days, and we can only get instruction after school. I'm a little more fortunate because my angel can teach me some things, but honestly, how are we supposed to find anything out?"

"That's unfortunate. We can add only a little more. First this Zephyr organization. They have seemingly come out of nowhere after this event, apparently well organized and funded. Now this is not to say there are secret societies on Earth that we do not know about, but it is troubling. Most in the supernatural community stick together, having been trained together for the most part. Also, most of our goals are the same and there are so few of us, we tend to share knowledge and manpower. Zephyr, however, has not reached out to any other organization and in fact rebuffs our attempts to offer assistance.

"Then there is the matter of a spirit hunter we know nothing about training young Sam here. This is most troubling. Given what you've told us about your own experiences with the group, I feel only more apprehensive about them, not less. Second, I understand there is some question if your powers, Matt, are truly angelic. Our seers have verified that they are. That is why you and the Samson reincarnate are to be spared the... cleansing."

"Yes, let's talk about that," piped up Elizabeth. "Are you really saying that, at any moment, spirit hunters are going to descend on our town and start slaughtering innocent children?"

"It will take a little while longer to gather the forces necessary to eliminate both the Zephyr group and their students at once, with minimal collateral damage. We are stretched a bit thin," said the man on the right.

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I stepped “left,” leaving them motionless and stared at him.

“Bring up the data from my initial deep scan of the planet,” I commanded my armor.

“Working,” it replied. “Please state query.”

“How many beings here were recorded as having the unique properties I would now ascribe to the sub-group ‘spirit hunter?’”

“One thousand, one hundred and ninety-five.”

“Confidence interval?”

“99.8%.”

After all, even with equipment as sophisticated as mine, some error is to be expected.

“How does that break down?”

“One hundred twenty-eight are between the ages of sixteen and twenty and should be considered training. Six hundred and forty are between the ages sixty and eighty and should be considered unfit for active duty, given the strenuousness of the tasks they undergo. Their superior physical abilities while vibrationally separate may mitigate this, but further study would be required. Four hundred twenty-seven are thus considered to be on ‘active duty’ and ready to respond to any crisis.”

Stretched a bit thin? I stared at the human, wishing I had the ability to read everyone’s thoughts. *That’s a force four times as big as what they would find at the school. Do they really fear a bunch of kids that much?* I had seen them fight, spirit hunters were powerful. Mostly because all they did was train and then fight, from a young age. *What he’s said doesn’t make sense. I’ve seen Rosalita teleport, she did so just now. There’s no reason to believe she’s in any way unique in that regard. Also the humans have a crude but effective global information network so any call that went out should be responded to in moments. Even if some were on a mission currently, it wouldn’t take much time at all once a decision was made to point every member they had at a task. They teleport to the destination, take care of it, and then move on to the next one. Is he lying, or is their organization really that... incompetent?*

I stepped “right” again and the dialog continued.

Elizabeth stared at him, and he stared back. “You didn’t answer my question,” she said at last. “Tell me to my face. Are you, or are you not going to come to my town and slaughter me and all my friends? And I remind you that we are the *victims* here. None of us wanted this.”

“We feel that is the most prudent course of action,” said the other man.

I could kill them for you right now, if you wanted, I heard Elizabeth say in Elizabeth’s mind.

But more would only come, it wouldn’t solve anything.

“How can you even consider that?” demanded Matt, taking Elizabeth’s silence as shock.

“How can we not consider it?” asked the woman. “There were numerous cambions created in this event, and we even have some intelligence that other demonic powers may have been unleashed. Those with what we call a ‘demonic heart’ or ‘demonic blood’ or even a ‘sundered spirit.’”

Elizabeth stiffened as the three sets of eyes fastened on her. The woman continued.

“We kill such people when we find them, without hesitation. Their powers are too dangerous, and too uncontrollable, to be left in our world where they can cause immense harm. All people with holy powers were killed immediately afterwards, by seeming coincidence. Add to that the demonic presence around the school building itself and it seems blatantly clear this entire situation was engineered for some unknown purpose, by demons.”

“So?” spat Elizabeth. “Again, we’re the victims here! Do you go shooting the survivors of a terrorist attack or help them?”

“How can we be sure you’re not all being trained as terrorists?”

“By our actions! We haven’t killed anybody! We just risked our lives to eliminate a demon that was hanging around! Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that supposed to be your job?”

There was a pause.

“I guess you haven’t seen,” said the male on the right, pushing a newspaper across the table. There was an article: “Grizzly murder in Rochester.” It went on to say apparently without a weapon of any kind, a man’s head had been exploded, seemingly from the inside.

“That doesn’t prove it was one of us, there are lots of people with powers in the world.”

“That’s true. But if it’s the start of a trend...”

“You’re going to kill us because of what we might do? Based on the evidence of a single incident that might not even be related to us? Even if it was, punishing all of us for the action of one? Overkill, much?”

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Their reasoning does sound a bit hollow. Still, it fits with the attitudes I saw in the young spirit hunters I followed after arriving here. It also explains Sam's attitude towards demon kind, is he being brainwashed in some way? However, he is not being trained by this society, but by Zephyr. Is there some kind of instinctual hatred of demons shared by all spirit hunters?

“So what would you suggest?”

“How should I know? I've had power three weeks, I don't even know all the things I can do with them yet. And every time something comes to kill us, I find out I haven't even scratched the surface. Just the other day I found out a couple of scratches in wood can turn my powers off. Just do that!”

“Sadly that can only be temporary, at best.”

“So send us teachers to counter Zephyr's influence. Set us up as spies and give us the tools to uncover their real motives. Investigate where their money is coming from. Build us a school and relocate us all there. Just killing us isn't going to solve the problem!”

“We think it will. In any case, there is a school run by the Foundation to train kids, usually a little older than you, when their powers start to manifest. But they don't have the room to accept most of your class, or teach grade school subjects when they usually teach high school ones.”

Interesting. I'll have to look into that school sometime. In any case, this class will be going into high school quite soon, I'm sure they could be watched until then, and just enroll normally. If they were all six year olds, yes, I might agree, but this man admits these kids are basically the age powers start showing themselves. There's no provision for kids that express powers early? That seems like a deeply flawed system right there... you always have contingency plans, especially with people that can generate energy beams from nothing.

“Okay, except Zephyr goes back underground, takes what they learned this time, and then does it someplace a little more out of the way. Or one at a time.”

“We do not believe they could do something on such a scale again, now that we have been alerted to the possibility of it happening.”

“Right. You're stretched too thin to deal with the problem as it stands now, but you think having a hundred schools pop up with similar issues would be caught by you in time? How do you know they aren't preparing that even as we speak? You didn't catch them the first time, after all. Isn't it better to see what they're up to here, where you know where they are?”

“The problem with that is, every passing day makes you more powerful.”

“You people have decades of fighting experience,” she almost screamed. “Are you really so afraid of a bunch of kids?” The ground started to shake a little as her control slipped.

“Liz, please, calm down,” said Matt, stepping in front of her. “I know this seems hopeless, but I'm sure we can come to a solution.”

“And if we don't, you're safe anyway, right? You and Sam? It won't be your parents and siblings crying over your grave in the end, will it? Wondering why? Why? Why did my child have to die? Because of them!” She pointed past him.

“We'll get through this,” he said, grabbing her shoulders and looking into her eyes.

She took a deep breath, and the rumbling stopped. “Okay. Okay!” She looked past him. “I just hope you feel a great sense of satisfaction as your blades slice into innocent kids, and their pleading eyes stare up at you. Because when you die you're all going straight to Hell for it.”

“We do what we think is right,” said the man on the left. “In any case, if your souls really are pure, you'll ascend to Heaven anyway. So what's the problem?”

“Oh, yes, that makes it all better! What terrific logic you've just used! I'm stunned with your clever counter attack. Wait, let's take it one step further! Let's just kill everyone on Earth, right now! After all, why wait? If paradise awaits us, why spend another 80 years down on this mud-ball? Well, a little less for you guys.”

“Liz,” hissed Matt.

“I'm just asking.”

“Clearly Liz here is a bit distraught over the situation-” started the female.

“Yes, being told to your face that when they get around to it, someone's coming to kill you will do that to you.”

“As I was saying, we'll forgive her outbursts. What about you, Matt, what would you suggest, as a channeler of holy power?”

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He paused to think for a moment.

“I think that some powers are more dangerous than others. The cambions I’ve seen can fly or shoot fire out of their hands but I doubt they are really all that dangerous. Maybe we could identify those with the most dangerous abilities and see if maybe they could be taken to this other school. Leave the seers and the artificers here to try and get their lives back in line. Also the kid’s personalities should be taken into account. A seer with a vindictive streak is more dangerous than a cambion that just wants to look normal again and uses their powers sparingly.”

“Well said. That actually sounds like an excellent suggestion!” said the man on the right. “Why don’t we give you, oh, say until the 15th to come up with a list of powers now held by your classmates, and how they seem to be reacting to them?”

“I’m no psychologist...”

“Just your opinions will do nicely. I’m sure the more dangerous ones will be easy to spot.”

“I’m willing to do the work if you think it will help.”

“Good, that’s settled then. We’ll take no action until then, fair enough?”

Does he think they forgot being told the society wasn’t ready to attack just yet anyway? He’s just offered them nothing in exchange for them doing a bunch of work they should be doing themselves. At least when I wiped out worlds too dangerous to exist I spent the equivalent of local lifetimes agonizing over the decision. These people took, what, a week or two?

“That will be fine!” said Matt, before Elizabeth could say anything.

“Excellent. That does bring us to something we said before, however. Liz, can you tell me exactly what powers you have? I ask because of your hair, is that your natural color?”

I better tell them the truth as much as possible, she thought. For all I know one of them could be a seer. I would have one at this meeting if I was them.

The real question you should be asking yourself, put in Elizabeth, is this: Who do these people think they are? Making you answer questions like you’re on trial. Ordering you about. They’re nothing. Together you and I are a match for any of them.

“Yes, it’s always been like this. What about it?”

“Just tell us about your powers.”

“Well, I’m a spirit energist.”

“And?”

“I learned I was also a shaman a few days ago?”

They shared a look.

“And anything else?”

“I can... copy powers I see performed?”

“Do you hear a voice, or have bad dreams about a demon, maybe one that offers you power?”

Hey, they really do know about me! thought Elizabeth.

My probe reported Elizabeth’s brain lit up as she furiously thought of an answer to their question.

“My spirit projection, the ant, gives me information about the Earth and things underground, if that’s what you mean. And I learned to call the moon spirit, and get information about the nighttime.”

“Can we meet your spirit projection?” asked the other man.

You realize that if you come out right now, they will kill us, and before you say you can take them, more will come, and more after that, until we are dead. You got me?

I’ll consider it.

“Of course!” Elizabeth said with false enthusiasm. “But I’ve only called it out once so it might not work.”

“Do your best.”

She concentrated, and my armor warned me about a power build up in the local area. A flame almost begin appearing, but almost seemed... hesitant? Then that disappeared and the ant appeared in its place. It looked around. The three at the table relaxed, and I saw the others in the room doing the same. I realized the ground was shaking again, and out to a much greater radius than Elizabeth herself had been able to reach. Was it possible more of Elizabeth’s “soul” as these people called it, was tied up in this energy creature than in Elizabeth herself? It was yet another thing I hoped to one day learn.

“Very well done, you may send him back now if you wish.”

She started to correct him, but thought better of it, and the ant vanished.

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“I’m afraid that’s not enough, however,” said the other man. “We still don’t know if we can trust you, so I’m afraid we’re going to have to give you a little test.”

“What more do you want from me?” Elizabeth wailed. “I am not a circus animal to perform for your amusement!”

“This will be the final thing, I promise,” remarked the woman.

“Fine, what is it?” asked Elizabeth, defeated.

“We trust Sam and Matt because we trust the power that guides them. To know if we can trust you, we have to have some evidence. You can refuse, but that would mean you were suspect.”

And you’ll probably not let me leave this place alive, thought Elizabeth. I never should have come here.

The man continued. “Some time ago, one of our members was pulled into another dimension. We had basically given up hope, but recently we learned there was a chance he could be brought back. So it’s a simple retrieval mission, really. The problem is the location. It’s much more dangerous than even the Demon World, which I wouldn’t send even a spirit hunter into without extensive study and preparation.”

“Fine. Whatever. Just tell me what I have to do so I can get this over with.”

They looked at each other again.

“Will you not be taking your friends then?”

“Your issue isn’t with them, it’s with me. If you’re just using this to get rid of me quietly, the result will ultimately be the same. I’ll need them to carry word back about exactly how you operate. Or maybe you’re too cowardly to go and retrieve this guy yourself, I don’t know. In any case, going with me is their decision, not mine. I won’t ask them to choose between their own safety and their loyalty to me, because that isn’t fair to them.”

“You know I’m coming,” said Sam. “We’re a team.”

“I’ll go, you’ll need my angel’s knowledge on this mission, I think.”

She smiled genuinely at them both, and seemed a little less deflated now. “Thank you.”

I was worried. Exactly where were they sending this girl, who had hardly any training? Were they all insane? No matter what task they had her perform, if she was under the control of a demon, the demon would do whatever it took to get their trust, so it could stab them in the back later. Right? These people supposedly were “guardians of humanity” but then

calmly discussed killing children. My opinion of humanity went down a little.

“Very well,” said the woman. “I will go and make sure I recall all the words to the incantation. It’s not something I do every day, after all. I will return shortly.”

She left, but not after giving a pointed look at Rosalita, who went over to the group.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Hey, I could have died twice in the last week. I've got two people apparently favored by the Heavens by my side. What could go wrong?”

“A lot, actually. This was a regional commander that was lost, and rank in the society is determined solely on how powerful you are.”

“Really?” asked Elizabeth, clearly surprised. “You don’t know how much that one statement explained to me. This entire conversation makes complete sense now. How about that.”

Yes, it did explain a lot. These people thought with their weapons, not their heads. A dangerous thing to do no matter what the situation.

“Uh, right. Anyway, I don’t understand why she’s sending you guys. If he couldn’t get out, he died. I mean it’s been like two years since he went missing. And where you’re going; it’s basically all your nightmares rolled into one, then set on fire. And the fire wants to kill you too.”

“Great, sounds pleasant. No wonder they’re sending sacrificial lambs. You sure you two want to come?”

“Are you sure you want to go?” asked Matt.

Elizabeth looked around and lowered her voice. “Do you think I have any other chance of getting out of here alive, knowing what you know about me and what they said?”

The other two considered, then shook their heads.

“And there’s your answer.”

“What?” asked Rosalita, but she was interrupted by the woman coming back. She directed the others in the room to clear a space, which they did.

“The portal I’m opening will take you to Primoris, which is basically “above” Heaven. It’s the highest realm of our existence, and even angels won’t go there.”

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“It’s a place of madness!” blurted Matt, probably informed by his angel.

“Yes,” replied the woman simply.

“How do we know he’s even still sane? What if he just fights us, thinking we’re more visions of madness?”

“You’ll just have to deal with that. Bring him back at all costs.”

You had no idea, at that moment, how much I wanted to phase into their reality and end the life of every so called “spirit hunter” on this planet. They were all guilty, from the ones in this room seemingly vaguely interested in the proceedings but doing nothing to stop them, to the others that were out doing whatever it was they were doing. But I held back. There was a chance, however remote, that this entire situation was manufactured. A play. A test. A sick test, but a test nonetheless. I vowed however that no matter where she went, I would protect Elizabeth from this place they were sending her to, and get her back.

“It will take a few moments to open the portal,” said the woman.

“If I call on the aid of the one spirit I know, will that interfere?”

“No, you may make whatever preparation you wish.”

“Great, I’ll go out for a hamburger and see you guys in a couple of months.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I know what you say. Only you know what you mean.”

Score another point in her favor.

She got a dark look from the female, who started chanting. Elizabeth did the same. I expected a warning at any time from my armor about power build up but it never came. Something appeared in the center of the cleared area, but it was no dimensional portal. I stepped “left” and studied it.

“What’s this?” I asked my armor, putting a hand through it.

“Object registers no mass. Object registers no reflection. Object registers no energy signature powerful enough to traverse dimensions. Conclusion: Object is visual representation of portal only. Possible hologram or similar.”

I knew it. But why all the deception? Sadly, that was the one question my armor couldn’t answer.

I stepped “right” again.

The others shielded their eyes as odd forms and energy swirled just beyond the portal. I had to admit, I was impressed. It took a certain imagination to come up with something like that.

Elizabeth had finished chanting and was busy tying her chain to the midsection of her friends so they didn't get separated. She turned to face the portal.

"You can still back out."

"He needs rescuing, right? If you're really too timid and you have to send a child in your place, I pity you."

"You likely will die," said the man from the left.

"Then it'll be on your conscience. I hope you choke on it."

"Why do it then?" asked the man from the right.

"What choice have you given me? I'll tell you: Hobson's Choice."

"Huh?" expressed Sam with his usual wit.

"He was a farmer. He would sell you any horse in his barn, but you had to pick the one closest to his barn door. So really, you had a choice of one, no choice at all."

"You think that's what's going on here?" said the man from the right.

"Did I misinterpret the whole 'we're coming to kill you and all your friends' from earlier? You say you can't trust me until I go through this little hoop of yours. I'm totally within your power one way or the other. The way I see it, my back's to the wall. I die here and now because you can't trust me, or I die a week from now in your attack on my city. At least this way I have a chance." She gestured to the portal. "I've already survived things I thought sure would kill me, why not add one more? Once I do this maybe I have a chance of getting you to call off your attack, slim as that seems from what I've seen here."

"So you're doing it for your classmates?"

"No, I'm trying to buy time so you'll let me leave this awful place and maybe I can say goodbye to my mother and father before you come and kill us all. Monsters!" Tears were pouring down her face, and it looked like she was struggling just to remain standing.

"I think that's enough," said Rosalita, a little shaken herself.

"Yes, I think it is," said the woman, lowing her hands. The illusion vanished.

"You have until the 15th. Rosalita will come and get you." The other spirit hunters filed out as Sam and Matt hugged Elizabeth and tried to calm her down.

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“I’ll, uh, I’ll take you back now.” said Rosalita.

“Thanks so much for your support in all that,” Matt said sarcastically.

“My hands are tied. For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

“So am I.” said Elizabeth. “You’ve all made an enemy today. Not a strong one yet, but an enemy nonetheless. Maybe more than one.”

Something in Elizabeth’s eyes caused Rosalita to look away, and shiver. The others just clung together.

Coping

“Put it on paper, save it for later.” -- Mike Birbiglia

The woman from the room came over and looked at the group, and Elizabeth stared daggers back at her.

“There’s a rest room through that door and on the left, if you want to freshen up before you get back,” she explained.

“Yes, I’d better,” replied Elizabeth. “If I’m going to explain my absence to Zephyr I better look the part.” She headed off in that direction, and having nothing better to do, I followed behind. She went in and I floated there in the hallway, looking around.

Several minutes later she came back out looking a little more presentable, and went back into the main room. Sam was now looking angrily at Matt, who was staring uncomfortably at the floor. The woman spirit hunter and Rosalita were not in sight.

“Now what?” asked Elizabeth.

“He went and told her!” said Sam.

“What?” Elizabeth rounded on Matt.

Oh, super. This is really getting out of control.

“When you were gone, she asked me straight out. I couldn’t lie to her!”

“Yes Matt, yes you could have easily lied to her. Or said something like ‘I haven’t heard that she has one,’ which would have been the truth. Or what about ‘I haven’t seen one when she tried to bring out her spirit projection last.’ That would have been the truth too!”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

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“No it’s not okay, Matt. Did you go to sleep when they were saying they kill people like me *on sight*? Was your attention distracted by something shiny? You’re supposed to be my friend, and you’ve just signed my death warrant.”

“They aren’t just going to kill you.”

“Really? How lucky for me to be the one exception to their normal policy. Or do you think just because you’re here they’ll hold off?”

“Well... no.”

“Congratulations. You get to explain to my parents why they find my mangled body lying somewhere, and don’t leave out the part where it was all your fault.”

She turned her back on Matt angrily. “And did you betray me in some way while I was gone, Sam? Tell her the color of my panties, perhaps?”

“No, I... wait a second. If you can joke-”

“Oh I’m still furious at him. But what’s done is done, and honestly if they have seers I’m sure they already knew. I just expected better from him, that’s all.”

“Yeah, me too. Anyway, while we’re waiting for Rosalita to come back, what *are* we going to tell Zephyr?”

“Seems some people around here are into telling inconvenient truths, we’re going to tell them exactly what happened. You have a problem with that, betrayer?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“They’re still people. Maybe they did this to us, maybe not. But they deserve the chance to prepare.”

Sam shrugged. “Whatever you think is best.”

“Anyway, the group can be evil but the people in it might be okay. Maybe Derren is just following orders and knows nothing about it. We have to take every situation into account.”

“Hey I’m agreeing with you!”

“Because you know what’s good for you.”

“Yeah I do.”

A moment later Rosalita walked up and asked them if they’re ready to go.

“You’re just- yes, yes we are!” Elizabeth said, trying to hide her shock.

I'm surprised too. Was all that before just a show to see how she would react? Or, when it comes down to it, do they not have the heart to kill a little girl in cold blood? Who are these people?

"Where would you like to go back to?"

"The house, I want to look around and see if there's anything interesting left by the demon."

"I'm sure Zephyr is already there," hedged Sam.

"Maybe, but that's where we left from, so it's where we should go back to."

"Maybe right outside, someplace hidden?" suggested Matt tentatively. "In case it's the cops that got there first?"

"Did you hear something, Sam? Oh, I had a thought. If someone heard our scuffle and called the police, they might be hanging around. We should probably go back someplace out of the way and check it out."

"Good thinking," said Rosalita, looking back and forth between the two of them. "Did something-" she shook her head. "Gather round."

I willed myself back to the house ahead of them, and saw that, yes, Zephyr agents were carrying a lot of stuff out of the place. I saw them appear behind a woodpile some distance from the house.

Gathering evidence, or destroying it?

"You better get out of here," Matt said. "I don't know what your reception will be."

"Probably for the best. I'll see you all on the 15th okay?"

"Yeah, unless we're dead," Elizabeth said under her breath.

Rosalita bounded off into the forest, and the others peaked around the woodpile.

"Look, there's Derren. We'll go talk to him."

"Mordecai is there too," remarked Sam.

The group went up the stairs and into the house, where Derren and Mordecai caught sight of them.

"You're back, and in one piece apparently."

No thanks to you, Elizabeth thought darkly. I can see where your priorities are, though.

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“We certainly didn’t expect a spirit hunter to come and whisk you away like that,” said Mordecai. “You’re all unharmed, I trust?”

If you call undergoing psychological torture to be “unharmed,” I guess they are.

“We’re all right,” said Matt. “They just wanted to hear our side of things.”

“And sometime between now and the 16th they’re going to come in force and kill everyone with powers they find here. Just thought you should know.”

The two uniformed men shared a look. “Maybe you better tell us everything,” said Mordecai.

The three related what had happened, and waited expectantly while the Zephyr people mulled the story over.

“In the first place, thank you for bringing this to our attention. Secondly, you don’t have to worry. I’m confident we can take any size force the society might send here.”

“With no collateral damage?” asked Elizabeth. “A battle between people with powers is bound to be very, very messy.”

“I’m not saying it’ll be us sitting down to tea with them, but any innocent lives that are lost will be on their hands, not ours.”

“What can you tell us about them?” asked Matt.

“Probably what you’ve just experienced for yourself. They can’t be trusted, obviously. As some kind of self appointed guardians of humanity, from the beginning they basically tried to wipe out everyone that wasn’t a spirit hunter. More recently, and by that I mean the last few hundred years, they’ve scaled their operation back to just focusing on demonic ‘threats’ as they put it. Summoners, cambions, demon artists-”

“Sundered spirits,” put in Elizabeth.

“Exactly. More because they don’t have the manpower to go after every two bit ESPer or seer that comes along, than any less zealotry on their part.” He barked a laugh. “I’m sure they debated for days when they found out about you, Matt. A cambion that was also a petitioner. I can just see them- ‘Do we kill him or not? I mean he got chosen by Heaven.’ Man, to be a fly on the wall in that meeting.”

The three looked at each other. “Anyway, I tried to buy us some time by saying I would compile a list of people that had powers and what powers they got. I thought if they had a list of names, rather than just faceless ‘kids’ they would be more hesitant to attack. And maybe if it was mostly less dangerous powers like seers, they would leave us alone?”

“When do they want it- wait, the 15th, I’m guessing?”

Elizabeth nodded.

“We already did that. Trust me, no list of names is going to sway their decision making one way or the other. If they wanted a list, they could have just asked us, instead of just attacking. No, better for you if you just stay out of it at this point.”

“They also mentioned some other school, Demongate High?”

“That place? It’s just as bad. I mean, even the name gives it away, doesn’t it? Do you want to go to a place named Demon Gate? But yeah, the school exists, I won’t say it doesn’t. The Foundation and the society have basically been vying for control of the supernatural world since they both began. They are both equally guilty of many atrocities throughout history. I wouldn’t put it past the society itself to have engineered this situation to prove its point about how dangerous demon kind is.”

Elizabeth nodded.

“You’ve only known them an hour,” he remarked, “and already you can see where I’m coming from, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Honestly, we’re trying to save you from going to that school and being further corrupted. Where the society tries to kill anything even remotely related to demon kind, the Foundation actually cozies up to demons and makes deals with them! Two sides of the same coin. Anyway, you kids better get to your bus, it’s getting late. Try to stay out of it from now on, okay? Just let us handle things and everything will turn out okay.”

Stay out of it? That’s what Elizabeth was arguing for before all this began.

“Gladly,” said Elizabeth. “There’s just one other important thing I need to mention.”

“What’s that?”

“Matt here went and told them I had a sundered spirit.”

“That was rather foolish.”

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“You’re telling me. Should I be concerned?”

“You are well within your rights to be concerned. I’ll have our seer check up on you and your future to make sure they don’t try anything before the big effort you say they’re building up to.”

“Thank you, that makes me feel a little better.”

“Speaking of her,” said Derren. “In a few days she’ll be ready to take a peek inside your head and see what can be done about that demon problem of yours.”

Days? Why the delay? I thought.

“Really? That’s great news! Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I can’t make any promises now, it might come to nothing.”

“Just to know something is going to be tried makes me feel a little better.”

“Anything else?” asked Mordecai.

The three shook their heads.

“I’ll see you later then.”

That night before Elizabeth went to bed, she got out a sheet of paper and started writing.

Mom and Dad,

If you are reading this, I am dead. I’m sorry you had to find out this way but you deserve an explanation. The truth is, something happened to me the night of the Valentine’s Day dance that changed my life. I’m not sure if you would call it being blessed or cursed, but I learned I had been given fantastic powers. You know that earthquake that started up right afterwards? That was me. I learned to control it, and started to learn how to use my other “gifts.” Primarily that of energy control, talking to spirits, and mimicking other powers I saw around me. I’m not crazy. Matt, Sam, and probably almost a hundred other kids got them too. We could all do different things. Matt talks to literal angels. Hopefully he or Sam or someone from Zephyr can fill you in. That’s the group that came to train us. They suggested I didn’t tell you so you wouldn’t get freaked out. Apparently though, if you’re reading this, one supernaturally powered group or another killed me because of what I became. Maybe it was demons, maybe it was

some other group that thought I was some kind of threat. Maybe Zephyr was actually the evil ones? I don't know, they are all so powerful and I know so little. I just wanted to say goodbye to you, and that I love you, and none of this was your fault. Apparently the world is more dangerous than any of us knew, and I was thrown into it unprepared. Please take good care of Ivy and Zachary, and give them my love too. Sorry I wasn't a better daughter.

Love, Elizabeth

She carefully folded it, tucked it into her hidden journal, and softly cried herself to sleep.

The next day Matt went around talking to people, it looked like he was going to make that list of his despite what Mordecai had said. Elizabeth looked really down and out of it, and wouldn't even talk to Matt at all. At lunch the three got together again, Matt sitting down by Sam, while Elizabeth slid a little ways away from him.

"Here's what I've learned so far," said Matt. "Rumors are going around about Derek, who no one has seen in a couple of days. Everything from him getting eaten by something he summoned to being sucked into a Hell portal. I'm sure you've all seen this, just take a look around the cafeteria."

The others did. I saw what he was talking about. The kids sitting together now was very different than the kids sitting together the first time I had seen them all eating lunch.

"It's easy to tell who has powers now, they all sit together. Apparently either Zephyr is encouraging the belief or they've just come up with it on their own that the people that got powers are better than everyone else. Those that can't be seen by normal people are the worst because they're doing the most harm. Thefts are on the rise, pranks are getting worse, that sort of thing."

"Yeah, prank responsibly," said Elizabeth, with a weak smile.

"People other than Sam have been told to steal stuff. Knives and old coins are the most common, but anything antique seems to be fair game. To their credit, kids are also being sent to kill demons like we were. So it's not all bad. Jared seems to have gotten powers, but has given them up and is not using them anymore. No one knows why. I've got the names of a lot of

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kids with powers, and guesses to what their powers are based on the group they are now hanging with. All this really changed the friendships around here.”

“Good thing it didn’t change ours, right Bee?” asked Elizabeth.

“Bee?”

“Sure! Bee.” She pointed to Matt. Then to her tray. “Come on, you can get it. Bee...”

“Tray?” ventured Matt.

“Bee... Tray...” She pointed to her ear.

“Oh! Betrayer.” said Sam.

“Thank you, I would never have figured that.”

Elizabeth looked smug.

The day after that, Elizabeth got a note in her locker that she could meet Regina, the seer, after school. She told Matt and Sam, who wanted to come, and after classes they went down to the room on the note. Derren was there on the phone, and motioned them to come in.

“They’re here, I’ll let them know.”

He snapped the phone off.

“I’ve got bad news- No one has seen Regina for hours.”

“She’s missing? Do you think it was the society making a move?”

“It’s entirely possible. She’s our only seer at the moment so naturally they don’t want any warnings coming from her about their future actions.”

“What can we do? Can I help?” asked Elizabeth.

“Humm, maybe you can. We have the kids she was teaching looking for her with her powers, but with your ability to assist people...” he thought for a moment. “Can’t hurt. Let’s go see them.”

They all headed off to another room where another member of Zephyr was trying to coach them through things, but was obviously no seer. There were three boys and two girls, all with their eyes closed and concentrating.

“Has Jeremy shown up?” Derren asked.

The man in the front of the group shook his head.

“There’s a student missing too?” asked Matt.

Derren nodded. “Apparently Regina’s best student. Do your thing and maybe we can find them both.”

Elizabeth sat down in front of one girl and they started whispering to each other. The girl closed her eyes again and started concentrating, while Elizabeth made suggestions. Suddenly the girl yelled and fell over, causing everyone to jump. The boy next to her also jerked his eyes open. “I think I saw it too,” he said shakily.

The girl started crying and carrying on, babbling incoherently about garbage cans and death. Everyone looked over to the boy.

“Go check near the dumpsters, I guess?” he said.

“You two, come with me,” Derren said to the two other students. “We might need you to help tell what happened. Liz, if you're willing to help out some more? It seems your assistance was quite valuable.”

“I'm happy to help,” she answered. “But I'm a little afraid of what we're going to find, judging from that reaction. I think I helped a little too much.”

“We need to find out what happened, and this is the only way we have at the moment.”

“Okay.”

“You two, if you can get her calmed down, see if you can find Jeremy, okay?”

The boy looked over at the girl. “I'll try.”

On the way there, one boy spoke up to Elizabeth. “We really aren't that great yet, so I'm not sure what help we'll really be. Even with your help. How did you do that, anyway?”

“I'm a shaman. I have the Power of Assist, it's a long story. Anyway, I can make one of you even better than that, temporarily.”

“Really? How?”

“I can call down the Spirit of the moon to assist you. But I would need to know, what one aspect of yourself would you improve to get a better result in this case?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean would you want more insight? Better willpower? More knowledge?”

“Oh, well, most seer powers are just, like, visions and stuff. So I guess more insight?”

“You got it.”

Elizabeth started chanting and focusing her energy, and I watched as her power reached out and started influencing the boy she was talking to. By the time they reached there it was done.

“Okay, you're as good as I can make you.”

“I don't feel any different.”

“Don't worry about it, you are.”

“If you say so.”

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The scene at the dumpsters wasn't a pleasant one. The seer Regina was lying, crumpled in a heap, inside the fenced in area near the dumpsters. The fence behind her was deformed, meaning she must have been thrown against it pretty hard. It didn't look like she had been burned or otherwise hit with an energy attack, so it must have been something physical. There was a piece of paper on her shoulder that I saw was radiating power, and Derren looked troubled as he looked down at her. Other members of Zephyr started arriving and one remarked that yes, it must be a conceal ward. Probably to delay their finding of the body.

"Whenever you're ready," said Derren. "I know this won't be easy for you."

"It won't get any easier," said the boy, and went over to the body. Elizabeth went with him and did whatever it was she did to help, which did seem to work. The boy remarked that whatever she did, it must have worked, his visions have never been this clear. However as the minutes ticked by he seemed to get more and more visibly distressed, until he fell over and looked around confused.

"They were right. I didn't believe them, but they were right."

"Who was right?" said Mordecai, coming up behind him. "Who did this?"

The boy scrambled back away from him. "No, don't come any closer!"

Elizabeth just looked confused. "It's just Mordecai. What did you see?"

"No, can't say. Too late. They were right."

He got led over to a bench to sit down, but kept flinching away from anyone that went to touch him. The others just looked worried.

"I guess it's up to me then?" said the pale looking guy that told Matt about his cambion nature, coming up behind everyone.

"See what you can learn," said Mordecai.

"You can do what you do to the dead as well?" Matt said, a bit disgusted.

"Yes, and they tend not to squirm around quite as much either. If you'll excuse me?"

He went into the fenced off area and closed the gate, so whatever he did wouldn't be seen by the others.

Matt and the others walked over to the kid, who was still looking around furtively and mumbling to himself.

“Can you tell us anything,” he asked gently.

“No. Now that I've seen they'll kill me. Kill you too if I tell you. Safest not to tell you.”

“Who will? Spirit hunter society? They won't kill us, they already said they wouldn't. You can tell us, it'll make you feel better, trust me.”

“No, Jeremy was right. I should have listened!”

Suddenly he sprang up and raced towards the school building. The Zephyr members watch him taking off, and one said into his phone “Yeah, he just booked it into the school. You better get here quick, he's losing it.”

Matt took off after him, leaving Sam and Elizabeth staring at each other. They shrugged and took off after Matt.

The boy seemed to be looking for something in the building, but with no pattern I could detect. Sam raced by Matt and tackled the kid to the ground, who struggled to get up again.

“Tell us,” he said, trying to pin the kid so he can't get up.

“I'm a petitioner, I have an angel guarding me,” Matt said, panting as he caught up. “And Sam has a destiny to fulfill. We won't be easy to kill, trust me. You can tell us!”

“No, it's too late. He warned me, and I didn't listen, and look where it got me. It's too late for all of-” he stopped and got a weird look on his face. “Sam?”

“Yes?” answers Sam.

“What am I doing here?”

“What?”

Looking up, the three see that another member of Zephyr has come around the corner towards them.

“You can let him up. Obviously he saw something he wasn't prepared for, so I just erased his memory of the last few minutes. He has no idea what's going on right now.”

“Oh,” said Sam, looking at the boy. He helped him up.

“I did what?” asked the kid.

“You better come with me. You just had a traumatic experience, best to rest awhile.”

“Uh, yeah, Sure. Whatever you say.”

He was led off, leaving the three standing in the hallway.

Suspicious

Torment my heart.

“Okay, that was disturbing,” remarked Elizabeth. “We hardly know anything more than we did before. Two people have been freaked out, one person who just lost some of their memories. Which I guess proves that is what Derren was talking about when he implied Zephyr could do that to my mother, if she freaked about me telling her about my power. Plus we found out the one person who was going to help me control Elizabeth is dead, but not who did it.”

“So now what?” asked Sam.

“We need to find Jeremy,” said Matt. “That’s all I really got out of that whole thing. Maybe Jeremy saw this coming and is hiding out someplace? Come on.”

He led the others back to where they left the other three seer students and barged in the door.

“Any luck finding-” his words died in his mouth. The two were engaged in some sort of courtship ritual I had observed humans finding desirable, and jumped away from each other.

“I was trying to calm her down,” the boy stammered. “And one thing lead to another...”

“Whatever,” said Matt. “Did you find Jeremy or not?”

“Oh, right! Uhm...”

“I won’t use my powers again!” said the girl, her face red.

“Guess it’s up to me then,” said the boy, sitting down to concentrate. The girl just ran off.

Wait, wasn't there a second female seer in this room before? Where did she go, and why aren't the others concerned about her absence?

Elizabeth once again used her power to assist and several minutes later the boy reported back that something was blocking him, but they seemed to be in the city, on the roof of some building.

"That's it?" asked Matt.

"Like I said, there's something blocking me. They're alive, I guess?"

"It's more than we had before. Thanks."

"No problem. So... Regina, is she?"

"You're going to need another seer teacher, if that's what you're asking."

"Do they know who did it?"

"That other guy seemed to, but he freaked out about it and someone erased his memory."

"Oh."

"Thanks for your help."

"Thanks for yours," he said to Elizabeth. "That's weird that you can just help people like that."

"Yeah, at least one of my powers is useful."

"What-"

"Come on, let's go." She pulled the others out of the room.

"So now what?" asked Sam as they walked outside.

"I want to get Iris here and see if he can't spot them before they head inside," replied Matt.

"Uh, is a phoenix flying around the city really the best way to go?" asked Elizabeth. "He is rather distinctive."

"He's not that big though. As long as he moves fast enough and stays high enough it should be okay. Anyway, people are getting used to weird things around this town."

"I guess. Well, do what you think is best. You'll just wind up going behind my back and doing it no matter what I say, so whatever."

So Matt did what he needed to do to call this bird creature to him, and was assisted by Elizabeth. In a flash of light, the multi-colored bird stood before them.

"Oh, Matt. How nice to see you again so soon!"

"Hey, Iris. You don't mind helping us out again, do you?"

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“Why, not at all. What can I do for you?”

“We need someone found. A student like us who has been missing a couple of days. Apparently he’s somewhere in the city, on a rooftop. Just don’t approach him too closely and don’t come right back if you find him, either. If you’re followed somehow we don’t want to lead others to him if we can help it.”

“Sounds like you’ve been having a busy time these last few days.”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“I’m willing to give it a try. What does this boy look like? There must be many young boys on roofs in the city, I would imagine.”

So Matt gave Iris a description of Jeremy and the other kids he might be with, and the phoenix took to the air and winged away.

While they waited for her to return, they discussed what to do if he did find them.

“How are we going to get there?” asked Elizabeth. “I’d be happy to fly us there on Anthony’s back, but I’m more likely to get Elizabeth at this point. So that’s out.”

“I don’t know. Right now I just want to know he’s safe. We can think of something after that.”

“Okay. Who were those kids you said he was hanging out with?”

“His super hero buddies. You know, the kids at that table that one time when Jared was messing with them?”

“The notebook incident?”

“Right. He was drawing super hero costumes for his friends and him.”

“I seriously hope they aren’t running around the city with targets painted on their backs as ‘super heroes.’”

“I hope not, too.”

Elizabeth gave Matt a suspicious look, but dropped it and gazed up at the sky with the others waiting for Iris to return. They didn’t have to wait too long.

“I’m pretty sure I found them,” he said, settling his feathers.

“Great! If I showed you a map could you pick out where they are?”

“I could try, I’m not too familiar with human maps.”

Matt showed him a map on his computing device and he narrowed it down to the area he thought was where they were.

“And they seemed okay?”

“They seemed to be training.”

“That’s okay then. Thanks for doing that for me.”

“Of course. It was nice to see the human world from this side for a change. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Not at the moment. I’ll let you know though!”

“I’ll be around.”

Matt released his hold and a moment later Iris disappeared.

“They’re alive at least, that’s something.” said Sam.

“But we still can’t reach them,” remarked Elizabeth.

“Wait a second, maybe we can!” said Matt, snapping his fingers. “His art page on the Internet! I bet I could send him a message through that.”

“Go for it,” said Elizabeth.

They waited around until the late bus came, but got no response.

“Listen you guys, obviously that Zephyr person can change memories. I suggest you both start keeping a journal of stuff you see and do, and read it over occasionally. If what you remember happening doesn’t match up with what you wrote, you’ll know something funny is going on. And I don’t mean a prank, either.”

“That’s a pretty good idea. I’ll get one started tonight,” said Matt.

“Keep in touch,” said Sam. “If you feel you’re in danger, don’t hesitate to call!”

“If they were coming they would have done something by now,” she replied. “And why take all the effort to come here twice. They know I have nowhere to go.”

With that the group went home to await the coming of the next storm.

The next morning, Matt called up Elizabeth.

“They wrote me back, want to meet us at the library,” he said to her. “But they say to only bring people we’re sure of. Are we sure of Sam? He is a little more entranced with Zephyr than we are.”

“I’m still not really sure of *you*, at the moment, if you want my honest opinion. Did you forget? But I guess you’re all I’ve got if it comes down to choosing between the two of you.”

Who do I trust most? she thought. *The person who betrayed me just days ago or the person I think is being brainwashed by Zephyr?*

“Let’s leave him out of it for now,” she finally said. “We can always fill him in later if we want. Did I ever tell you? When I was possessing him

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I got to poke around his memories. He just remembered having a tough time going to sleep that one night after taking care of the ghost. But if his memory was modified, I guess he would remember it like that, huh? I don't know, if they can change his memories they can change his personality, because he'll remember making decisions about things he really didn't."

"Not much we can do about that. Any problem getting to the library?"

"Are you kidding? It's practically my second home, it'll be fine."

So the two met in the front of the library building and went inside. Sitting on a bench was a brown haired young human Matt addressed as Thom. He didn't look very strong, and in fact could stand to lose a few pounds.

"Just the two of you?" he asks.

"Just the two of us," Elizabeth singsonged. "We'll make it if we try, just--"

"Whatever. Come on."

He led them into a side room and puts up a hand. There's the sound of a door unlocking and another kid peers out. He opened the door and let them all in.

"Kind of a bad scene at school Friday, huh?" said a lighter haired, more muscular boy.

"Hey, Jeremy," said Matt. "Nice to see you alive. So were you the ones that did it?"

Elizabeth jerks her head to look at him, and the others look at each other. In the room are two other young males, all the people Matt had been talking to at lunch. I identified them as Barry and Marcus, who had much darker skin than the others.

"Had to be done, man," said Marcus. "We didn't like doing it, but Jeremy here said she was too dangerous, so..."

"Just hear us out at least before you go flying off the handle," said Jeremy. "These Zephyr guys, I don't think they're even human."

"So what are they? Demons? I thought seers were supposed to pick up on stuff like that?"

"Not demons, exactly. But not human either. Either way they aren't the good guys in all this, my visions have told me that much."

"What exactly have your visions told you?"

"It all started about a week ago. I got the sense something wasn't right with them. Like they were evil. I also got the feeling they weren't

telling us everything about our powers, or at least leaving stuff out. Or telling us the wrong things, or distorting things to make others look worse than they really were. Also, have you noticed they encourage the use of powers, rather than telling us to hide them at all costs?"

Hey, I thought about that ages ago, and it was suspicious even then! Elizabeth thought.

"And to top it all off, I don't think she was just a seer. When we fought her, she did things a seer shouldn't have been able to do."

"Except you just said they might not have told you all you can do," argued Elizabeth. "Plus, I'm two things, a shaman and a spirit energist. She could have been something else apart from just a seer."

"This was different. You had to be there."

"So you four decided to take matters into your own hands and take her out? Because if you're wrong, and they all have abilities they shouldn't, it was all for nothing. Another will have seer powers."

"It wasn't easy for us. I still think about it all the time. But if anyone could tell them what was being planned against them, it was her. So yeah, we did what we thought needed to be done."

"So do you have any proof of all of this, or just your visions?"

"They're too smart to leave anything incriminating out where someone could just pick it up. But I know what my visions tell me are true. And they're evil."

"You want to hear about evil? Let me tell you about spirit hunters!"

She told them about her experience and how they were all in danger from an attack by the society.

"Man, it just gets worse and worse," said Thom. "What are we going to do?" he asked Jeremy.

"We've been gone from school too long. Much longer and they'll suspect us. We'll just head back Monday with some excuse and see what they say. As for spirit hunters, well, maybe we'll get lucky and the two groups will just wipe each other out."

I'm all for that plan, thought Elizabeth.

"You might not want to go back though," she said, concerned. "They probably have figured out what happened by now."

"Nah," said Barry. "I've been making a ton of these wards that block seer powers. That's how she didn't see it coming."

"Even if another can't do what she did, the problem is they won't block other, similar powers. They have a creepy pale guy who's a breath stealer. He was going to see what memories he could get from her corpse. He seemed pretty confident he could get something."

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The four visibly paled.

“Oh man. Oh man. What are we going to do?” said Marcus, starting to pace.

“I think,” said Matt, “that we should call in spirit hunter society, or at least Rosalita. Give them this new information we learned. With your testimony against Zephyr, maybe that will influence their decision.”

“Them?” wailed Elizabeth. “This will just prove them right, and further justify wiping us all out! Plus, they have seers, and if a kid can figure out Zephyr is evil, I would hope a group of adults in the society could.”

“Who else do we have to turn to? We don’t know how to contact anyone in the Foundation. Who else is there?”

“Fine. Just leave me out of it. I’ll go someplace else when they get here.”

He punched her identifier digits on his computing device and waited for an answer.

He waited.

And waited.

“She’s not answering. Hey Rosalita, it’s me, Matt. I’ve been talking to one of the seer students and he has some new information. Can you call me back when you get this? Thanks.”

He hung up.

“An otherwise excellent plan marred by someone not picking up their cell phone,” said Barry.

“Honestly, if you’re not going to have it with you, why even have one?” asked Thom.

“I just hope something bad hasn’t happened. Like she’s been detained for supporting us or whatever?” said Matt.

“She could be asleep now for all you know. She could do most of her patrolling at night, if demons are more active then. So she sleeps during the day. Who knows?” asked Elizabeth. “At least give her a little while before you start to worry.”

“Yeah, I guess. Hey, you think I could hack into her account and see where her phone is?”

The others all looked at him.

“What do you think this is? Some cheesy, ‘write a GUI in visual basic’ cop show? Do you know the first thing about hacking anything?”

“Uh...”

“And even with your luck, Matt, I don’t think just trying to guess her password is really ‘hacking.’ Do you even know what kind of phone she has, or what network she’s on?”

“It was just an idea!”

“And if we were playing Shadowrun, or it was three hundred years in the future, when everyone has tracking tags embedded in their skin at birth, it might have been a great one. But unfortunately this is reality, and that kind of thing just doesn’t work.”

“Forget I said it.”

“Got it. So what are we going to do?”

“We have almost two days, so I wouldn’t advise you guys to panic.”

“Yeah,” said Elizabeth brightly. “Maybe by going to them directly with this information they won’t just kill you on sight. They’ll wait until you’ve delivered it, then stab you in the back when you go to leave.”

“Oh thanks,” said Marcus, “That’s a comfort.”

“Sure thing!”

So the group waited around about an hour, then got too concerned about not being behind wards and left. Matt and Elizabeth poked around various archives for any information about this other group they had heard of, but didn’t find anything. They discounted a sensationalist story they found in a 1960’s publication giving that name and claiming it was some shadow organization that ran the world. Given the source and the age, they figured it wouldn’t help them even if it was completely accurate. They said their goodbyes and went home for lunch.

Elizabeth spent that afternoon doing homework and studying for a “social studies” test, whatever that was. She then updated both her journals with what had been going on. She seemed a little more upbeat, seeing as she was still alive, but expressed concern that the society could probably find her wherever she went. By that reasoning, if they were coming here anyway, why come twice? I had to admit, that would be inefficient. So she didn’t think she was “out of the woods yet” which I took to be some kind of cultural metaphor.

I heard her mother remark to her brother why he couldn’t be “more like Elizabeth, she’s doing her homework and studying right now,” after he played video games for six hours straight and was thrown off the couch. I had to wonder, what was Elizabeth like before all this happened? How had it changed her? Would she have been down bugging her mother like her younger sister, if the threat of a neighborhood invasion wasn’t on her mind? Of course by that path of logic, why do homework at all? So perhaps she put more faith in Zephyr’s efforts to stop it than spirit hunter’s efforts to

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kill them all. Perhaps she was just the type of person to do what was expected of her, no matter what the future might bring? Only further observation would answer that question. The question of who she would have become if all this had not happened would now probably never be explored.

She also spent time in meditation, talking to her spirit guide about how to better call her out once it was safe to do so, and about spirit things in general. She wanted to honor the spirits and get closer to nature, but that was easier in higher temperatures, apparently. Or at least more comfortable.

At around nine that night, her phone rang, and it was Matt.

“Did Rosalita ever get back to you?” she asked.

“Oh, yeah, she called like at three.”

“Thanks for letting me know, Bee. What did she say?”

“You're not going to like it.”

“What, you didn't betray someone else, did you?”

“You're not going to let me live that down, are you? Anyway, she said if they're wrong, they just murdered someone with powers. That means it's their job to kill them.”

“It's always just 'kill, kill, kill' with those people, isn't it?”

“That's what their powers are good for, I guess? Anyway, they're going to look into what Jeremy said.”

“That's something. Anything else?”

“We should talk to Sam. He called and wanted to know what was up. I told him we had some things to discuss with him. Can you come over tomorrow?”

“I suppose. Are we going to tell him about our meeting this morning?”

“I don't know. But Terathel brought up a good point. Do we trust Sam, our friend, more than we mistrust Zephyr?”

“And that made sense to you, did it?”

“I think he means that, yes, Sam might run off to Zephyr and tell them we've been meeting with Regina's killers. But he is our friend, and he's been our friend longer than he's been training. So if we can convince him to hold off, and maybe get him to open his eyes around them, we might get him away from them.”

“You're right, we have to counter any influence they are exerting over him. He's too powerful to just let them have him without trying to stop it.”

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“So eleven then?”

“Sure, I’ll be there. Hoping this isn’t a bad idea.”

“I’m sure it’ll all work out.”

Changes

*People don't really change, they just
reveal more or less of themselves.*

So the next day Elizabeth went over to Matt's house and they waited for Sam to arrive. They didn't have to wait long. He invited Sam in and they went up to his room.

"So what's been going on?" Matt asked. "Did Mordecai say anything about who killed Regina or if the missing students were found?"

"No, but he's been a little on edge since it happened. Even had me sneak into Barry's house and see if there were any clues around there. No luck. Anything on your end? You were kinda weird on the phone last night."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I had some things to think about. We wanted to talk to you about Zephyr."

"What, this again? I know you two don't trust them for some reason, but honestly, they're trying to do good here."

The two looked at each other.

"The truth is, we met with Jeremy and the others yesterday to get their take on things. What they said wasn't good news."

"Okay. Well, what did they say?"

"We want you to keep an open mind," said Elizabeth. "Don't just dismiss what we're going to say."

"I get it. Just tell me."

"Jeremy said he got a vision of them being evil somehow, and not exactly human. He said they aren't demons, but they're not on the up and up, either."

“But he had no proof.”

“No, just what his seer vision told him. But he trusts it, and that’s why he and the others ran off.”

“That’s it?”

“No, we need your help.”

“With what?”

“Mordecai trusts you, maybe we can use that.”

“We’re not asking you to betray him or anything,” Elizabeth hastily added. “Just keep your eyes open for anything that can help us know who’s right. spirit hunter society thinks we’re all too far gone to even bother with. They think Zephyr is corrupt. Jeremy said they aren’t human. They say everyone is against them because each group wants to control the supernatural world. But it’s all he said/she said. We need hard evidence. And we can only move against them until they get a new seer. So if you see a chance to poke around a laptop or a phone they carry with them, or heck even a notebook or a hushed conversation in the halls, do it! That’s all we’re asking.”

“Well,” he hesitated. “I guess if they are on the level, and I can prove it, you’ll drop this. So I suppose it’s in my best interest.”

“You can think about it however you want. Just keep in mind others have said they’re the bad guys, so Mordecai saying stuff isn’t the gospel truth or anything.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’ll see what I can learn.”

“Thanks,” said Matt.

“It’s probably a moot point anyway. They’ll have another seer teacher Monday, I’m sure.”

Elizabeth looked thoughtful. “If they don’t, it’ll be very telling. After all, they went on about how their organization is so great, and founded after the Heaven gates closed. If they can’t scrounge up a simple seer in a weekend...” she left it hanging.

“But that wouldn’t mean they were evil,” counted Sam.

“It would mean they didn’t want to just hire a new seer,” said Elizabeth. “Someone who wasn’t in on their plans, right? Or maybe someone who hadn’t fed.”

“Now what are you talking about?” asked Sam.

“I was thinking, if they aren’t human, what else could they be?”

“And you came up with vampires?”

“Not in the traditional sense. Hear me out. What do we know? We know that the event happened, and we got powers. We know Zephyr came out of nowhere to come train us. We know holy people got killed. We know

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they don't have a holy instructor, or they would have found one for Matt. Right?"

"I have sort of given up asking, and they've never brought it up. That is rather suspicious."

Elizabeth went on. "We know only kids got powers even though adults were at the dance. We also know there's a thing called a breath stealer that can feed on memories and powers, because we saw him do it twice. Once with Matt to find out his cambion powers and while we didn't see it, he said he could do it to Regina. These are all the tiny pieces of this puzzle we have, to try and put together without seeing the picture on the box. Oh, and they're all blank until the puzzle is complete because we don't know *how* they fit together, so things we think are related might not be. Off to the side we have the possible pile: Jeremy suspects they aren't human, and that Regina had other powers apart from being a seer. What picture can we begin to see with these pieces? Take the breath stealer thing one step further- What if we're not being turned into an army, but rather we're being turned into *food*. They train us, force us to use our powers, and then suck those powers out of us."

The others regarded her a moment.

"I guess it's as plausible as them being space aliens or something," said Sam.

"It's interesting reasoning, anyway," put in Matt.

"Just keep it in mind, okay?"

"Sure."

"Sure."

"Holy powers being gone does concern me, though," said Matt. "Maybe there's something specific a holy chosen can do, or that a petitioner can get here that would do something to them?"

"It must be something only those chosen by the Heavens can do," said Sam, "And something they can both do. Why kill one group and not the other, in that case?"

"Unless they can't digest holy power?" asked Elizabeth.

"It's possible," answered Matt. "I'll talk with Terathel about angels that can do things that holy chosen can do. Maybe something will come up."

"There has to be a reason those with holy powers were targeted. I think if we answer that, we'll be halfway to cracking this thing."

"I hope you're right."

The rest of the day passed normally, and while Elizabeth wasn't totally relaxed, she did spend some time with her family in the afternoon. It was good to see her with some sense of normalcy, even if she didn't expect it to last.

The next day, in "homeroom" the principal made the announcement that several students, including the four Elizabeth had met with, and a boy named Derek continued to be missing. He pleaded for any information people might have that would lead to their being found.

I guess they decided not to come back after all, thought Elizabeth. I wonder what the society said? I should have asked Matt when I saw him last. Guess I have sort of a blind spot with them.

At the end of the day all the kids with powers were directed to a field in back of the school, where they went to hear what Mordecai had to say.

"I'm sure you all heard what the principal had to say this morning. I just wanted to make sure you all understood, you should come to us first rather than the normal people if you find something out. We don't have a new seer teacher yet-" the three looked at each other, "so we're relying on the students for all our seeing now. We'll have someone helping them out so they get practice time like all the rest of you. As two of them are still refusing to use their powers, it's up to the others to pick up the slack. That about covers it. You can all head to your normal practice rooms."

The group then looked about as everyone left.

"Jared isn't here," remarked Sam. "I guess the rumors of his not going to training anymore were true."

"I'm more interested in why there's no new seer," said Matt.

"You and me both." replied Elizabeth.

It was Elizabeth's day to train with the shamans, so she went there and waited for the trainer to arrive.

"We want you to do some recon with your spirit projections," she said after coming in. "Remember that normal people can't see them, but the missing students certainly can. Use their abilities to do your best to find them, and call on whatever spirits you know to aid you. Good luck!"

Okay, what's the point of that? thought Elizabeth. They certainly aren't hanging about anywhere near the school. These guys can't get anywhere far enough way to do any good on foot before they have to come back and catch the bus. Oh well, not my problem.

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The others started to leave, but Elizabeth hung back.

“And what should I be doing?” she asked.

“Oh right! You have that little problem.”

Yeah, that no one but me seems interested in trying to control.

“How do you feel about trying to bring out your spirit projection?”

“That depends,” replied Elizabeth seriously. “How do you feel about fighting a kumiho if I can’t restrain her and she decides she doesn’t like you?”

“Ah, good point. We can work on chants.”

“Excellent.” *No slogging around uselessly in the cold for me. See-ya suckers!*

On the late bus Matt looked grim as he climbed the stairs and sat down next to Elizabeth and Sam.

“I asked around at the cambion class,” he began, “And found out something disturbing. Those kids that became unseen? Apparently Zephyr had them kill a couple of policeman they said were demons.”

“Wait, was that the dead cops on the news that no-one could explain?” asked Sam.

“The very same,” he replied gravely. He shook his head. “That nice girl with the wings we found that first day back... to think she’s a cop killer now.”

“Wait, you’re telling me a couple of kids snuck in and killed a group of demons that also had access to guns? That doesn’t sound right.” said Elizabeth.

“I know. It doesn’t make a lot of sense. Being unseen by normal people wouldn’t help them, the demons would see them just fine. If they weren’t demons then the society is going to be even more pissed off once they find out.”

“How would they even kill demons anyway? The three of us couldn’t handle one, Rosalita had to take him out for us.”

“I could have taken him,” said Sam.

“Or he could have possessed you and made you kill us, don’t forget. ‘Stop hitting yourself,’ remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Right.”

“Anyway, the way they were talking, it was like they were invincible now. I guess I should tell them about-”

As if on cue, Matt’s portable computing device beeped. He got it out and looked at it.

“Oh yeah, almost forgot. The spirit hunters want to see us at the library.”

“I don’t want to see them anywhere,” remarked Elizabeth.

“They aren’t going to do anything in broad daylight!” protested Sam.

“Why not? No one but you guys can see them!”

“I’ll protect you if it comes to that. They won’t dare risk killing a petitioner. I hope.”

“Thanks. Maybe it’ll just be Rosalita, come to take us to the headquarters again. Count me out. Still, I better call my mom, I don’t want to walk back from there.”

So she called her mother to ask if it was all right to stop at the library, and it was, being only seven minutes away by car. I found it interesting that humans equated time and distance as though they were somewhat interchangeable. I guess when you can just will yourself somewhere, it tends to skew your thinking a little when it comes to distances.

So the three got off the bus and made their way there. Three spirit hunters were there, all of them vibrationally separate, so they did come ready for trouble. I wondered if this didn’t bode well. Both were the ones speaking for the society, one of the males and the one female. Elizabeth hung back behind Matt.

“Don’t be foolish Elizabeth, we aren’t here to start anything.” said the female.

“But you admit she does have reason to be cautious around you?” said Matt.

“Yes, well. In any case, what have you learned?”

Matt laid out exactly what he had been doing the past few days at the school, but the two didn’t seem very impressed. I didn’t blame them. He wasn’t able to really do much more than reiterate what he had said before. He had a list of some names, powers, and temperaments it was true, but that didn’t prove anything. I wondered exactly what they expected this lone boy to accomplish in the few days they had given him.

“It’s certainly a start,” the woman said, hopefully. “But honestly with what you told Rosalita before about Zephyr we were hoping for more.”

“Regina was only killed on Friday. So we only had one full day to learn anything. Until she’s replaced, we have the opportunity to be a little more bold about trying to find out about them. We talked about what else we could do just yesterday, in fact.”

“That’s good to hear,” said the man. “You do seem to be uniquely placed, as you are not expected to be in any one location for tutoring. If you

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do consider this to be just preliminary information and are willing to do more, and tell us anything you learn, we're prepared to allow that.”

“Despite what you may think, Elizabeth, we don't want to come here and make the streets run with blood,” said the woman. “We are of course keeping a close eye on the situation, and with a ‘man on the inside’ so to speak, no attack is currently planned. This report matches well with what we already knew and provides us more information about the nature of this situation. We will take all of this into account before any serious action is begun.”

The man cleared his throat. “Yes, the situation may not be helped by us just swinging our swords around here, a fact that maybe we've forgotten over the years. You've shown you can all be trusted and are willing to put some effort into finding out the reasons behind all this. That's good enough for us, at the moment.”

“In this one case, having a sundered spirit,” Elizabeth flinched back a little, “might have actually saved you. Just like a frog won't jump out of water if the temperature is raised little by little, these kids have been influenced slowly. You had to face something inside yourself all at once, and that raised your sensitivity to what you perceived as right and wrong.”

“It brings up a good point,” she said. “If Zephyr is so evil, why didn't they try to get me to work with my demon? She's supposedly really powerful, you would think they would want that force on their side. Even from the beginning they did more ignoring of her than trying to get her on their side. I mean it was all rush-rush-rush in the beginning to get her out here, and once she was out, they seemed to lose all interest.”

“I admit there are many unknowns, which is why we've decided to wait and observe for now,” said the woman.

“If there's nothing else, we'll need to be getting back,” said the man. “I hope we can work together in the future to make sure everyone stays safe.”

“I'm sure we can,” answered Matt. They nodded and teleported away.

Elizabeth looked confused. “Okay, that was weird.”

“Terathel said they were the good guys,” Matt answered.

“Yeah, but they seemed almost... reasonable. Were they really the same people of fire and brimstone we met before?”

“It's possible when they saw how you reacted to them, it was like a mirror, showing them what they had become,” ventured Sam. “Maybe they had a good, long think about methods, and calling them monsters hit home. Maybe they didn't like how it made them feel.”

“Let’s just hope the new, kinder, gentler society sticks around. Because it’s somewhat likely that was just an act to get us to lower our guard so they can stage their attack tomorrow. Words are cheap, let’s see their actions from now on and how they play out.”

“That’s about all we can do,” grumped Matt.

It does seem an interesting reversal, I thought. This is why patience on my part is so critical. Get all the facts, observe long term, don’t make any hasty decisions. Perhaps one or the other times was just an act, or perhaps they were both true- in context. Perhaps at the facility a hard stance had to be taken, but here, informally, the rules could be relaxed a bit? Without infiltrating the society itself, I will just have to learn alongside Elizabeth.

The three stood in silence for a bit.

“Let’s at least go inside, it’s cold out here,” remarked Elizabeth.

“Sure, and I can tell you about my tutoring session today.”

“Anything interesting happen?” asked Matt as they walked in.

“Sort of. I was asking about various things I thought would provide some insight into Zephyr but Mordecai was pretty evasive about the whole thing. I don’t get the feeling he’s that modest a guy, if you know what I mean. You get the feeling he’d be bragging up his accomplishments, that sort of thing, you know?”

“So you’re coming around to our side, is that what you’re saying?” asked Elizabeth.

“I’m not on any side, but I can see where you’re coming from. We do need to learn more.”

“Glad to hear it. So what’s the plan now?”

“I’m going to ask Jeremy if he can look into the disappearance of Derek. If I was in trouble and scared and most importantly missing, I would want to think someone would care enough to find out what happened to me.”

“He’s the only one who can, go for it.”

Moments later Matt got a message back and frowned. “He said he’s focused on Zephyr at the moment. One missing classmate will have to wait.”

“Not much more we can do, then.”

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“Seems to be our theme song,” said Matt.

“The lamest super hero theme song ever. Da-da-da-uugh.” Sam made a face.

Elizabeth giggled, the first time I had heard her laugh in quite a while. “We should make our own super hero team! Punch Master, Copycat and our Native American member, Runs to Petition Reinforcements.”

“Banisher, if you please. It’s about all I’ve been able to do that’s useful.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that one. I can see it now: ‘After the forces of evil gave them fantastic powers they became *even more lame and useless than before!* The evildoers’ plan continues unabated as our heroes sit and do nothing. This week: Even more sitting and discussing things! Will even a single power be used? Tune in to find out!’”

It feels good to see them being kids again, even if only for a little while.

20

Tragedy

When your heart just dies and you don't know why.

The next day lunch was proceeding normally, and the three were talking about a new “angel” that Matt was working on petitioning. He was telling them about it being some sort of emotional influencer that could maybe help Elizabeth, when suddenly several children all at one table burst into flames! I was taken aback, this was new. They screamed in agony as their flesh started burning away and everyone in the room started panicking.

Even a civilization this primitive should have some fire suppressant systems, I thought, looking above me. I noticed water delivery mechanisms above that scanned as having water behind them, but as I watched, they bent and twisted, rendering them useless. One person ran for a canister I scanned as being full of sodium bicarbonate, which would help to put the fire out. I watched in amazement as this person was unable to remove the canister from the wall, which should have been a simple enough procedure even for the young. Another individual was trying to open a cabinet where a thick, fire retardant blanket was stored, but again was unsuccessful. Within seconds what used to be living, breathing humans crumpled to the ground, their life force now absent. Meanwhile, kids were running for the doors, or frozen with shock as teachers tried to push their way into the room while kids streamed out.

What a waste, I thought. “Did the individuals seated there even have powers?” I asked my armor.

“Negative,” it replied. “Only the spared individual registered as having unclassified abilities.”

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“Spared-” I looked over at the table, and indeed, my armor systems had registered what I had overlooked; someone was left alive. At that moment a voice rang out.

“Jared Murray, you're next,” followed by insane laughter.

“Apparently that young male's name is Jared,” I remarked.

“Records indicate this is accurate.”

The lunch room was evacuated and closed off, and appropriate experts were called in. School was canceled for the rest of the day, and busses came to take the traumatized children home. Matt and Elizabeth sat in silence, along with the rest of the children on the bus. It almost seemed like they were just sadly accepting this event as a matter of course, a line of thought I believed they called “fatalism.” I could see that, to them, this might just be yet another tragedy in a string of tragedies, and slowly they were becoming numb to them.

I hoped I was wrong. Not so that they could keep occurring without being felt, but so that these events were not happening in vain.

That afternoon Elizabeth perked up a bit and wrote a message to Matt.

Brain is starting to work again. Can't believe it's me asking. Did you tell SHS?

Good point, he wrote back. I'll do that now. Several minutes later he wrote: They know about it. Want to meet at library tomorrow.

The super heroes once again meet to discuss things- no action taken!

I know how you feel, but what more can we do?

I wish I knew.

The next day school was still canceled so Elizabeth was dropped off at the library where she planned to spend most of the day. She walked over to meet Matt.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“About as well as can be expected. How about you?”

“The same.”

“Those poor guys yesterday. They didn't even have a chance. What could do that?”

"I don't know. Terathel said he didn't sense any supernatural power when it happened. So he thinks it might have been some kind of magic or something."

"Great. As if we didn't have enough problems with just supernatural stuff, now we need to throw magic into it as well."

"Someone talking about my magic fists again?"

"Hey Sam," said Matt. "We were talking about what could set those guys on fire like that."

"Not just that, though," said Elizabeth. "Did you see how every attempt to save them failed? It's that reality bending stuff again- the sprinklers didn't work, they couldn't get the fire extinguisher off the wall."

"Let's ask Rosalita what she thinks it was."

"Sure, when she- she's right behind me, isn't she?"

"Hello everyone. I'm sorry about what happened to your classmates."

Less apologizing, more figuring out how to stop it happening again, thought Elizabeth.

Everyone exchanged greetings, and Rosalita sat down.

"So does the society know what happened?" asked Matt.

"And has this made them more likely to attack?" asked Elizabeth.

"No, and no," she answered. "Whatever this was, it happened unexpectedly and then vanished without a trace. We have no idea what happened to immolate them like that."

Why am I not surprised? thought Elizabeth. "Like I was saying, not just set them on fire. It was like reality said 'You are going to burn to death and nothing you can do will stop it.' And then it happened."

"I can offer at least a partial explanation for that. If there were some invisible demons around, with spells prepared in advance, they could have just cast them as people tried stuff."

"Except that Terathel tells me that magic creates mystical circles, so you can physically see it being done. We didn't see anything like that."

"It's still more likely than reality itself trying to kill people. There are beings that could make that happen, but honestly if they were around, you'd know it."

"I can tell you who it wasn't. At least who Jeremy said it wasn't. I talked to him last night and he said it wasn't them or Zephyr. He's pretty sure about that, and honestly their group doesn't have any means of doing this anyway. So I believe them. And Zephyr had no reason to kill a couple of people with no powers, so I don't think it was them either."

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“We've got to punish someone for this,” said Sam, angrily. “We can't let them get away with it!”

“I don't think that's a concern,” replied Elizabeth. “When we find the guilty party we'll point you in that direction. But until that time, you just going to punch every person in town until you get the right one?”

“I guess not.”

“Then let's try to be constructive here.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me?” asked Rosalita.

The three looked at each other.

“There is someone who seems to be really missing. Derek Blout. I guess he got summoner powers, and if you say it could be demons using magic, it's something we should look into. I asked Jeremy to do it but he said he was busy with Zephyr stuff. Maybe now he'll be a little more receptive to the idea. I'll text him and ask.”

“Okay, Derek Blout. I'll look into that too.”

She waited around for a response from Jeremy but nothing came, so she decided to leave. “Let me know what he said. Stay safe you guys.”

A rather meaningless sentiment when reality itself can do you in, I thought. I wonder if my armor systems could be modified to detect changes in the quantum probability field? I was loath to try it myself- if I messed it up, who would I go see for help to fix it? My databases had information about the phenomenon of chance and 'luck' but not how to detect if 'luck' was overriding normal conditions. To think even I don't know what killed those young humans. My armor detected no power buildup in the area before they caught on fire, and none when the other young humans tried to put the fire out. I shook my head, then realized what I was doing. I'm picking up their mannerisms, too?

The three hung out there and quietly worked on stuff, and about two hours later Jared walked in and spotted them.

“Hey, thanks for coming,” said Matt as he motioned Jared over. “You all know Jared of course.” He was a taller boy, muscular, with sandy brown hair and blue eyes. He looked around like he had never seen the inside of a library before.

“Yes. Hello Jared,” said Elizabeth. “All that bullying doesn't seem to have worked out very well for you, has it?”

“I didn’t mean any of that stuff, I was just messing around!”

“Uh huh. And now five people are dead. Looks like someone has it out for you.”

“Look, if you're just going to-”

“Just sit down. Liz, that’s enough,” said Matt.

“Sure Bee, we’re all on the same side here, I guess? Unless you’ve somehow betrayed someone else lately that I don’t know about?”

“Ignore her.”

“Matt told me you don’t trust Zephyr any more than I do,” Jered said to Elizabeth and Sam.

“How come you don’t trust them?” asked Sam.

“It’s their attitude towards stuff that turned me off. I’m a true martial artist, they said. I thought that meant doing things like following the code of Bushido or something. Taking martial arts to the highest pinnacle it could go, you know? But our teacher didn’t seem very Bushido, let me tell you. So I stopped going.”

“I see.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Sam here has been a little more trusting than the rest of us where Zephyr is concerned.”

“I’m just a trusting person!”

“Then trust us over them.”

“Yeah yeah, I hear ya.”

“Anyway, do you guys have some kind of plan to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

The three looked at each other. “Uh, I think you have us confused with the other group that has a seer. We don’t actually have any real useful powers, you know?”

“What powers do you have?”

“Well, Mighty Fists here-”

“I thought I was Punch Master!”

“Sorry, Punch Master here can punch stuff.”

“It’s a gift.”

“Matt here knows how to call two, it is two now, right? Two different kinds of angels. A phoenix which is certainly helpful if you need something set on fire, and a dream eater I’ve not seen yet. Me? Well, now I’m the best of all. Among the powers that are safe for me to use are doing stuff I see someone else do, summoning a chain I’m more likely to injure myself with than hurting someone else, and calling spirits. I know exactly one, the

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moon spirit, which can make you a little stronger or smarter and let you turn into a ghost sort of thing. You can walk through walls, anyway. Except that one time, when we couldn't."

"I see."

"I did ask Jeremy to see what he can find out about it. He's the only seer we know that we can trust. And we can start seeing who else we can trust, maybe get the other seers on our side, now that their teacher is gone. Maybe the ESPers too, I'm sure they have useful powers," said Matt.

"I don't want any more people to die because of me, or to get killed myself, thank you. So anything you can think of to do, I'd be really grateful."

"We can offer you our support, not that it's probably much comfort to you. Anyway, stick around, maybe we'll get an answer."

So the four stayed until it was almost sundown when Matt got a message and called the others back over. "He said whoever is doing this wants to humiliate you, and do it in front of everyone. So nothing will happen until we get back to school again."

"That's something," said Jared. "At least I don't have to worry about my parents bursting into flames at dinner tonight."

"He said he'll keep trying. We better head home for the moment, see if school is starting back up tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it!"

My sarcasm detectors are going off again.

The next day at lunch everyone was talking about what happened Tuesday and about the weird things going on around town. It seemed that any secrecy surrounding the humans that had gained powers was being stripped away. Obviously it was impossible to hide the events that caused the deaths of so many, and those with the answers would have found it difficult to remain silent. Of course they would have only been able to explain that powers were real in the world, not the specifics of what happened. Unless Elizabeth and her friends were that ignorant, which I would have found hard to believe. Also, everyone kept looking over at Jared and no one wanted to speak to him. Everyone was sitting well away from him, so Matt said "Come on," and the group moved over to sit with him.

"Are you sure this is wise?" asked Elizabeth. "Not all of us have angels protecting us, you know."

"It'll be fine," Matt replied.

"You don't have to," said Jared. "I understand."

"Nonsense. If we don't stick together we'll never get anywhere in solving this."

"Thanks."

"Any news from your, uh, other friends?"

"Nothing since last night. Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"Did someone let some dog in here?"

"What?"

"Oh crap!"

The scene in the lunchroom changed as three large, black, vibrationally separate creatures came through the doorway to the left. Sam immediately became vibrationally separate, leaving his body, while Elizabeth put up a barrier and Matt started chanting. Sadly, one got inside the barrier before it was fully actualized and scrambled up onto the table.

Of course, even if the people without powers couldn't see the dogs, they could see the barrier, and started exclaiming over it.

The second dog looked at the barrier and then grabbed a young human from another table, then turned to Elizabeth as if to say "drop the barrier or this one dies." The young human was freaking out as he knew something was happening, but he couldn't perceive what.

Sam and Jared were trying to punch the one on the table into submission, badly wounding it and basically taking off one of its legs. Jared went to attack again after that but somehow the creature still managed to avoid the attack.

"Really?" asked Sam, exasperated. He punched it again and caused it to vanish.

"Sorry," said Jared.

Matt directed his attention to the one holding the boy down and it went away, and a second later Elizabeth did the same thing to the third. For some reason she didn't manage it, but her barrier went down and it started backing away. Matt started another banishing while Sam ran over and grabbed it, making sure it couldn't go anywhere.

He grappled it while Matt was chanting, and it shimmered a bit.

"Bye bye doggy," he said, but was surprised to still be holding onto it.

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“Really?!” shouted Sam.

“That should have worked...” Matt said, mystified.

“It didn’t work for me either,” said Elizabeth. “That one’s different!”

“Forget that,” said Sam, and just crushed it in his arms, making it vanish.

Everyone with powers was looking around to make sure nothing else was going to attack.

“Did I forget to mention that Matt can sometimes make demons go away?” Elizabeth asked Jared. “You know, when I was listing our powers?”

“Slipped your mind, huh?”

The young humans without powers knew *something* was going on, but had no idea what. Someone started screaming that Sam was dead, the curse had struck again, and Sam jogged over to his body and reentered it.

“I’m fine, see? Nothing going on here!” he said lamely.

Several students with powers rushed over to make sure they were okay, and things quieted down rather quickly.

“I can see being with you guys is going to be very interesting,” Jared ventured.

“I used to like dogs, too,” remarked Sam. “But with our doggy demon theme going on, now I’m not so sure.”

“You’ve tangled with dogs like that before?” asked Jared.

“Not dogs like that, they looked different. But dogs. We killed the guy who did them last time. Weird.”

“They seemed more interested in you than me,” he remarked.

“Sure, couldn’t do the fire again, it’s been done. Old news. Old hat. Passé, in a word.” said Elizabeth, looking longingly at her now ruined lunch. “What better way to move the plan forward than to have the people sitting with you ripped apart by unseen creatures? I guess whoever brought them here didn’t plan on them being banished, or smashed by Sam, as the case may be.”

“The plan to humiliate me, you mean?”

“The very one. It’s bad enough bringing demons in here to attack us, but did they have to ruin my lunch?”

“What’s more important? My life or your lunch?”

“That doesn’t even deserve an answer.”

Losses

You never know what you have until it's gone.

So the lunchroom quieted down again as everyone went back to their own concerns.

“So now what?” asked Jared.

“What do you mean?” asked Sam.

“You all just got attacked by demons! You're just going back to eating lunch?”

“Shall I run down our list of oh-so-helpful powers again?” asked Elizabeth, sarcastically. “Our month long experience has shown us that there is absolutely nothing we can do in situations like this. I mean, seriously, what are we going to do? None of us are seers, and I don't know enough spirits to get information that way. Better to just pretend it didn't happen and not let it get you down.”

“I see.”

“Though now that you mention it, didn't you say your new friend could tail people?” she asked Matt.

“Not like you're thinking of,” he replied. “He can tail people that try to escape by teleporting, for example. Like you know how you followed that demon into the other room back at the farm?”

“Yeah.”

“He could have done that. He can't go invisible and follow someone in real life.”

“Too bad. I was hoping he could see where Zephyr goes when school is over. Oh well.”

“Sorry.”

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“Yup, we've got nothing.”

“As long as you're taking all this seriously.”

“Oh, we are. We seriously can't do a thing. Until the bad guy comes along and says ‘You fools, it was me all along! Mua ha ha!’ we're just as clueless as the next guy.”

“I'm beginning to see that.”

At the end of the day, who should I see walking into the school building but Rosalita, the spirit hunter. She jogged over to the group that was saying their goodbyes.

Isn't it a little dangerous for you to be here? I thought, What with Elizabeth telling Zephyr you guys wanted to come kill everybody?

“Didn't expect to see you here,” said Matt. “What's up? Did something else happen?”

“Yes, actually, I'm here for two reasons. First I wanted to make sure you were all right. I heard about the dog incident this afternoon.”

“We're actually all fine, I took care of it,” said Sam. “I guess these guys helped a little.”

“Good to know,” she said. “The other thing was; I was hoping one of you could introduce me to someone in Zephyr.”

“You're going to start killing them off one by one?” asked Elizabeth.

“No, our current objective is to get to the bottom of this latest series of attacks, so I'm going to be the go between for the society and Zephyr.”

“Huh. The enemy of my enemy is my friend, is that it?”

“Something like that.”

“Sam, you're up.”

“Why me?”

“Because the only two I know are my teachers, but your guy seems to be the one they all call boss, right? So you might as well just go see him directly.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Yeah, I'll take you to see him. Come on.”

So Elizabeth went to her normal after school tutoring with Derren and the group met back up again to get on the late bus.

“Any problems?” asked Elizabeth to Sam.

“No, they just talked. He agreed they needed to find out who was behind this, so we'll probably see her around more often.”

“That’s... good?”

“It might be interesting to see if the society does any better than Zephyr, if nothing else,” remarked Matt.

“They certainly have a different philosophy, so who knows.”

They all got on the bus and headed home, but only a few minutes after pulling out of the school, Matt got a phone call.

“Hello?” he said into his computing device. “Hello? Barry, is that you? Are you okay? Hello?” Blood drained from his face. “It cut off.”

“What happened? Who was it?”

“It was Barry, but all I heard were the sounds of fighting. Then there was that laugh we heard before in the cafeteria, and then it went dead.”

“We’ve got to do something!” said Sam, jumping up out of his seat. “If they’re in trouble we owe it to them to help. Come on, we’re getting off at the next stop.”

“What-” started Elizabeth, but Sam grabbed Matt out of his seat and started dragging him to the front of the bus, so Elizabeth grabbed her bag and followed them.

Just what are we going to do? she thought. If they can’t handle themselves, they’re dead. Anything that could kill the four of them could certainly take us out easily enough. And for another thing, they could be anywhere. We have no way to reach them. This is stupid.

They left the bus and Elizabeth looked around.

“Great, now we’re stranded here. Where are we, anyway? I really wish my totem spirit wasn’t the ant...”

“What does that have to do with anything?” snapped Sam.

“You haven’t noticed? I tend to go along with whatever the group wants to do.” She shot a withering glance at Sam. “No matter how stupid the idea is.”

“Oh, I guess. So what are we going to do?”

“You dragged us out here without even a plan?”

“I’ll just petition Iris again,” said Matt, “She knows where they were, maybe they’re still hanging out there.”

“Meanwhile we get to stand out here, in the cold, doing nothing.”

“Don’t you care what happens to them?”

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“What’s happened to them has already happened. We can’t change it, or help them. I’m being realistic; now one of us is going to have to call our parents and have them come here to pick us up. How do you plan on explaining to them why we felt it necessary to get off on the wrong stop?”

“We can’t just do nothing.”

“Yes we can, Sam. We can easily do nothing, because that’s exactly what we are going to do. Stand here and do nothing. Even Matt is only going to call someone else to go do something.”

“Are you saying we should just give up?”

“It doesn’t look that much different from where I’m standing.”

“If you’re through...” said Matt, an iridescent phoenix standing next to him.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that,” said Elizabeth.

“Goodness,” said Iris, “There certainly is a lot of strife in the human world, isn’t there?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

So Matt explained what he wanted Iris to do, who was willing, and took off. The three just kind of hung out there on the street corner, getting some funny looks from cars going by. About twenty minutes later a shape in the sky started getting closer.

“I was too late,” Iris apologized when she landed. “They were already dead when I got there.”

Elizabeth shot Sam an “I told you so” look, but didn’t say anything.

“Were they burned?” asked Sam.

“No, more like torn apart physically.”

“All four of them?” asked Matt, shocked.

“Ah, there could have been four, yes. Hard to say now.”

“That bad, huh?”

Iris nodded.

“All right. I’ll send you back. Sorry to send you on such a pointless task as that.”

“We angelic beings do tend to be called upon for that sort of thing, so please don’t think anything of it.”

So Matt sent Iris back, then called Rosalita and told her what happened. He provided the address Iris had told them about earlier and requested she tell Zephyr directly. She promised to. He also called Jared and made sure he was okay. He then called his mother to come pick them up, which she did.

“All three of you?” she asked, concerned.

“Hello Mrs. McTaggart. Sorry about this,” said Elizabeth as all three got into the car. I settled myself on the ceiling, upside down.

“What happened? Why did you get off the bus here?”

“Uh...” Matt said, looking helplessly at the others.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “There was a situation on the bus and rather than wait until something worse happened, we thought we should just get off then and there.”

Matt stared at her. “Yeah, that’s actually exactly what happened.”

Elizabeth pulled out her computing device and texted Matt, obviously wanting to say something to him without his mother hearing. *It’s like I can tell the truth and still not betray my friends. Amazing, huh? I should give lessons.*

“You’re all okay, right?”

“We’re fine mom, don’t worry.”

“Because I’ve been hearing things about that school. People dying, or getting set on fire, or just up and disappearing. Weird things in the halls, all kinds of weird things. People are starting to say it’s under some kind of curse.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Elizabeth. *Maybe it was a powerful curse. Wish I knew someone to ask.* “It’s just a lot of bad luck happening to a lot of people all at once.”

“Isn’t that really the definition of a curse though?” asked Sam.

Elizabeth glared at him. He shrugged.

Matt read his text message, and glowered at Elizabeth. “Anyway, we’ll be fine mom. We stick together so I’m sure nothing bad will happen to us.”

Yeah, that doesn’t happen to all of us.

“I know it’s been hard on all of you, so don’t hesitate to speak up if you don’t feel safe.”

“We will,” they all lied.

That evening the news reports spoke of several bodies being found, but that no names were being released. Matt called Elizabeth and told her Rosalita was actually a detective working in the area, so she had the regular police working the case as well as the society. What good that was going to do, I had to wonder, which mirrored Elizabeth’s thoughts.

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The weekend passed without incident or any new information being discovered, which made me wonder just how hard these organizations were working to solve this. I had seen these people called seers have visions of distant places and work out things they had not directly observed, so where were they all? Of course, I had also seen a piece of dead tree pulp block out that ability so maybe it was a little more complex a situation than I gave credit for. Statistically, nearly a tenth of the class had died since I arrived on this planet, which was only one local month ago. If this rate continued, there wouldn't be anyone with powers left in less than a local year. I suppose it was no wonder people with abilities were usually kept away from the general populous, if this was the result of them mixing. Still, I had a lot of observations to make before I could come to any real conclusions about this world. I was seeing a very non-typical situation, which put people under an unusual stress. So in that respect it was very helpful for me, but in another, I would probably have to repeat my observations several times with a random sample of humans before drawing any real conclusions.

All that aside, when the group returned to school they had more unfortunate news waiting. Two more seers had been killed over the weekend, leaving only two students with that particular "gift" left alive. One was apparently hit by a car, the driver of which insisted he remembered nothing. The other just fell down some stairs, so it seemed we were back to something manipulating probability again. The third seer that should have been there seemed to have been totally forgotten, and it was only reviewing my armor's video recordings that I convinced myself she should have been there at all.

That day there seemed to be three groups developing within the school. Those that just wanted to give up using powers altogether and see if they could just get their normal lives back. Those that wanted to band together for protection, students versus everyone else. And finally, those that figured being near any Zephyr members was the safest place to be, and started following them around. Zephyr made an announcement that afternoon about the whole situation.

"Is everyone here?" asked Mordecai.

Everyone looked around and there was a general ascent that everyone was, in fact, attending.

“Good. I know with all these deaths, people are getting a little jumpy, so we're here to reassure everyone. We are working on it. To that end, we're stopping our tutoring sessions for the moment so we can concentrate on protecting the school and your homes. Our artificers are going to start making wards for you to take home and put around to keep anything bad out.”

Oh, super, thought Elizabeth, Yes, don't double our training efforts so we can defend ourselves or figure things out on our own. Instead, stop training us altogether and make some vague promises of future protection. Not suspicious at all...

“If you want to use the gym to practice on your own, that's fine. We'll ward it so normal people don't go near it after school. Once this situation has been resolved and we're sure you're all safe, we'll start the tutoring again. Meanwhile, if you notice anything strange come tell one of us as soon as you can. We'll start handing wards out tomorrow. That's all for now.”

“So where are we headed?” asked Sam.

“The gym,” Elizabeth said without hesitation. “I want to see some other powers in action and maybe find some things to emulate. Maybe someone making some wards or something. Anyway, I want to keep practicing.”

“Doesn't matter to me,” said Matt, with a touch of smugness. “I've got the same teacher I always had.”

So the group went to the gym and everyone was excitedly showing others what they could do more than any actual training. However, it was valuable enough in the sense that I finally got a good look at what other powers were out there. It seemed the energy these kids could now make use of was quite versatile. Questions remained, however, why one person could create such dramatically different effects than another. Were they not all human? Was the energy they utilized not exactly the same for all of them? Why then could they not harness it in the same way, and all learn exactly the same skills? *A pity none of them have thought of the question and asked about it, the answer might be very enlightening.*

That evening, Elizabeth wrote up the latest news and thoughts in her hidden journal. She marked down at this was day 30 with powers and that 19 people had thus far been killed. She seemed very troubled about that, and just kept staring at the number.

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If only there was something more I could do, she wrote. If I was a better shaman, would those people have died? Still, Marina is a better shaman and what good did it do her? She's just as clueless, or else this would have been solved already. If she's not part of the problem, that is. Will I ever be able to trust someone's intentions again?

She had a bit of trouble falling asleep that night, and in fact, suddenly jerked awake and put up a barrier of all things. I looked around but had no idea what had made her react like that. She spent a minute chanting, then dropped the barrier and looked around the room. She went over to her closet and peered inside.

What in the world is she doing now?

She shook her head and tried to get back to sleep, but again she seemed to see something and jumped out of bed. She turned the light on in her closet, and started chanting again. She glared about the room, seeming to concentrate on something.

"Now you're jumping at shadows," she exclaimed to herself. If something was going to attack me, it would attack. It wouldn't lurk about thinking about it. This is stupid, and I'm not having any part of it.

She went to sleep rather quickly after that.

During the next week Elizabeth asked around and many people reported seeing something in the darkness lately. Also it seemed incidents of "bad dreams" were on the rise, something I had to search their information network about. Apparently, while asleep, the human brain didn't content itself with firming connections of long term memories and showing amusing slideshows pulled from the imagination. It might also pass the time showing itself something disturbing for some bizarre reason. Yes, the human brain might put itself in some totally implausible situation for seemingly no reason at all. *No wonder humans are a) so messed up and b) happy to forget their dreams.* I had thought Elizabeth's "bad dreams" were just the influence of her inner demon, but apparently normal humans had them as well.

Members of Zephyr were true to their word, and areas of power began springing up around the school. They also started handing out packets of wards to those they felt were in the most danger. It seemed to protect as large an area as a house or a building took many overlapping wards so it was slow going.

To their credit, no one died in the next few days, making me think those measures might actually be helping. They did not decrease the group's alertness, as Thursday Sam got off his bus looking over his shoulder, concerned.

"What is it?" asked Matt, walking over.

"You see that thing, right?" he said, pointing into the bus. Down the stairs hopped what looked like a regular house cat. It was black and had white tips on the ends of all four paws. It looked up at them.

"It's a cat," said Matt. "And?"

"And it's been following me."

"I told you to take that jerky out of your backpack," said Elizabeth as she walked up. "Who's the cutest little kitty then?"

"What?" asked Sam.

"I'm a shaman, it goes with the territory," answered Elizabeth. "Being kind to creatures both great and small. Respecting nature, all that sort of thing."

"Right. Well I think... come on." He started walking into the school building, and the others followed. So did the cat. "See! It's really following me! What kind of cat gets on a bus?"

"The cat from Whispers of the Heart rode a bus," said Elizabeth.

"This isn't a movie!" said Sam. "I think it's some kind of demon."

The three moved off to the side of the entrance and stared at the cat.

"I don't know," said Elizabeth. "What sort of demon would take the shape of a cat and then just follow you around?"

"Probably waiting for the right moment to attack."

"Terathel, what do you think?" asked Matt. He seemed to listen for a moment. "He says it's supernatural all right, but it doesn't have a lot of spirit energy. Not as much as you, anyway."

Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at him, then turned back to the cat.

"Hey, did you see-" both Elizabeth and Matt said at the same time.

"Two tails!"

"What?" asked Sam, looking more closely.

"The shadow, it looked like that cat had two tails. Weird."

"Wait, Terathel is saying something."

"Look, can you understand me or not?" asked Elizabeth, bending down to get a closer look at it. It looked back at her knowingly.

"Wait, get away from it!" shouted Matt, pulling her back. "Terathel says it's dangerous, we need to kill it!"

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The cat looked up at him and shook its head, and right in the middle of the school entranceway he started petitioning something.

“Uh, are you sure-” started Sam, looking around. He didn’t get to finish as a baku, the second angel Matt had learned to petition, appeared and spotted the cat. The baku was vibrationally separate, so I could see why he wanted to get this particular creature here rather than the phoenix. It seemed to resemble an Earth horse, but it had striped legs, with paws on the ends, and the head of a lion.

The creature growled and the cat hissed back at it. Suddenly the baku tried to bound on top of it and the cat skittered away, dodging around people as it ran. The baku just charged right through them.

“After them!” shouted Sam, making people look at him strangely as he ran past. Matt took off after them.

“Gonna be another great day here in Rochester,” said Elizabeth sadly.

Hello, Kitty

Here, kitty, kitty, kitty.

Meanwhile the baku and the cat were rolling about in the bus loop, when suddenly the cat became a baku and took on the separate vibrational pattern. The two creatures now looked identical, and I had to wonder if Matt could identify his somehow.

One of them called out “Can you call this off, I really don’t mean you any harm!” while avoiding getting swiped at by a paw.

“Let’s get the full story first,” Matt shouted to the other one. “You’re probably evenly matched now anyway...” That baku backed off, sitting down next to Matt and staring at the other one.

“That’s better,” it said, turning into a cat like creature with two tails. It sat down and licked a paw, rubbing its face. “I guess I should have expected something like this, with how jumpy you all must be. Still, just attacking me out of the blue like that. Goodness, that was a fright.”

“So what is it?” asked Sam.

“I,” said the cat, “am named Socks. Nice to meet you. I’m a bake-nako, as I’m sure your angel calling friend here can tell you.”

Matt nodded. “Some kind of terrestrial shape changer. Not a demon.”

“Naturally not! I shudder to think.”

“Anyway, why were you following me?”

“How else does one observe things? I probably should have been more discrete, but I didn’t want to be seen as spying on you. Sampson was never known for his subtlety, if you get my meaning. By now everyone in the supernatural community knows you’ve come back, so our group decided it was time to make contact. I was waiting for the right time to broach the subject, but there were always people around, you see?”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Autographs are five dollars. What group?”

“Autographs, yes, that’s very clever. I say; can you, by chance, let him go back? I don’t like the way he’s staring at me.”

“He can go back when I’m satisfied you don’t represent a threat. With following people around and making them nervous, you should be glad we’re listening at all.”

The cat shook its head. “No trust, that’s too bad. No trust at all. Well, it can’t be helped, I suppose. In any case, I come from a group known as The Watchers. We’re sort of the clean up crew for the heavy hitters like the Foundation. What they see as too small to deal with, we pick up the slack on. But we focus more on terrestrial threats like... well, me, as an example, rather than demons.”

It’s been a month. Where were you guys before all those people got killed? thought Elizabeth.

“You were recruited by them, then?”

“Indeed, indeed. In this case, it may be above our pay grade, so to speak, but with the Foundation busy with its own concerns, right now it falls to us. They sent me.”

There was a bell ringing in the school.

“Look, we have to go to class. Will you be around today?”

“Of course! I’ll nose around and see what I can see, and meet you later. I do apologize about startling you all, really!”

Matt stopped maintaining the baku, which faded away again, and the two tailed cat turned back into a more normal looking specimen. He padded off.

“Terathel says he’s not lying about the Watchers. They do exist and they do take care of stuff like that. Anyway, let’s think about this later.”

And why didn’t this so called “angel” mention this group earlier, I wondered, when the young humans were discussing possible means to figure more out about Zephyr? Or at least as another means of gaining more information about powers in general. They may all be on the same side, but I have to wonder what else this “angel” is holding back from telling them. Certainly it might not have known how to contact any members, but even the name might have been useful. It stood to reason that normal people, getting caught up in something supernatural, would no doubt look to their fledgling informational network for answers. Taking that one step further, wouldn’t those sorts of “sites” be monitored by groups like this “Watchers” for possible leads on things they needed to take care of? Or even maintained a “website” of their own, so searches about certain things would lead to them. As long

as they didn't have videos of people actively using powers, it would just be passed off by "surfers" as "just another cooky group." Elizabeth was right about one thing, their response time was *horrific*, especially given how many had died in so short a time.

So the group went to class and didn't see the cat at all until after school let out for the day. Elizabeth got an envelope full of wards to stick all around her house, and then went to the gym to see about further training. She spotted the cat, watching everyone.

"Hello everyone," he said cheerfully. "Another day of learning complete? Marvelous."

"Did you learn anything?" Elizabeth asked.

"Indeed I did, thanks for asking. First of all that thing on the roof was pretty powerful, all right. I could still feel the residue of it, even this long afterwards. I think that area will be spiritually polluted for a long time to come."

"It isn't dangerous, is it?" asked Matt.

"Is a piece of wood that's been set on fire dangerous? It's just like scorch marks, that's all."

Uh, yes? It could set other pieces of wood on fire. And hitting someone with it would probably damage them more than just the regular, not on fire wood. Did he mean a piece of wood that has already expended all available energy and gone out?

"Oh."

"Also I've heard about these bad dreams everyone's complaining about. That's classic bogey behavior, that is."

"So something is causing them?" asked Sam, punching his other hand.

"Yes. It's not strictly a demon, but who knows where they all originally came from. They feed on fear and with everything going on around here, you can bet fear is a big part of it."

"So apart from some bad dreams, is it really dangerous?"

"They will go to some lengths to get a tastier meal. Kidnapping someone so others feel more afraid. Attacking popular people so the story can grow. That sort of thing. It'll get bolder the longer it remains in the area."

"Okay, well, what else?" asked Matt.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“These Zephyr wackos, is it just me or are they taking incompetence to a new level?”

Like you're one to talk.

Elizabeth giggled.

“What?”

“Wackos? That’s an interesting way to refer to them.”

“It seemed appropriate. I've been alive quite some time and I've never heard of them. Honestly, if the Watchers had gotten here first, they would have handled the whole thing quite differently.”

*So why didn't you? thought Elizabeth.
My sentiments exactly.*

The three looked at each other, concerned.

“Now these unfortunate chaps that were immolated; can you show me where? I didn’t want to go into the cafeteria during school hours, of course.”

So they took him down there and he sniffed around.

“Can’t tell you much,” he admitted. “There are multiple scents around here that are demonic, so whatever happened was probably magical in nature.”

“Not so fast,” said Elizabeth. “We've been attacked by demons here, so you're probably just smelling them. And demons were running all over the school before Zephyr started putting those ward things up. Matt banished a bunch but more always showed up.”

“I see! That does muddle the picture a bit, doesn’t it?”

“No chance of tracing this back to the source?” asked Matt. “Maybe try to separate where different things may have come from? That could tell us something.”

“Not anything I can do, sorry. In any case, I’m more worried about what may happen than what has happened. This bogey, that’s something I've handled before, so we should start there.”

“We?” asked Elizabeth.

“Certainly! Who better? You've had some training, I expect?”

“Oh, why not? But riddle me this: a lot of kids are talking about bad dreams lately and when I first saw this thing it just vanished like that.” She snapped her fingers. “It’s not walking between kid’s houses. That means it can teleport.”

“In a way, yes. What’s your point?”

“The point is, we’re going to somehow ambush this thing and kill it before it has a chance to get away? Because as soon as it knows we’re there, it’s gone.”

“It does have a weakness,” Socks explained. “Light. It can only travel through darkness, so as long as we get the lights on, it’ll be stuck there.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Elizabeth allowed. “Of course there could be more than one, and unless it visits me again, and I can just see my mom letting two boys stay the night in my room, how can we track it down?”

Socks looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he started sniffing her bag. “Your spirit energy makes feeling things out quite difficult, has anyone ever told you that? What’s in your bag?”

“You mean these?” she asked, pulling the wards out.

“Hummmmm. Yes, I suppose if you could show me who made these I could turn into them. Then I could use them as a tracking system. If the bogey tried to cross them they would alert me, and we could rush there.”

“Wait a minute, this could be the solution to a lot of our problems!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “If you can turn into anyone, just turn into one of them. That would solve the mystery of what they are, right?”

“I would get their memories, it’s true. As long as I stay out of sight so they don’t recognize me for what I am, that could work.”

“Get on that. Go on, shoo. Get!”

“One thing at a time. You have any bright ideas about the bogey?”

Wait, isn’t that the most important thing right now? This fear creature seems terrestrial and hardly worth the bother given the looming threat the Zephyr people pose. Maybe this bakenako has a one track mind.

“Maybe, since you ask,” ventured Elizabeth. “They only move around at night, right? Well, I know how to call upon exactly one spirit. The moon spirit. Moon, as in nighttime. I wonder if she could tell me if something like a bogey was moving around.”

Socks brightened up. “Really? You know moon, huh? That’s great news. Yes, that just might work.”

“We can try it, anyway. After all, I’ve never done something like that before. On that sort of scale, I mean.”

“You’re right, the scale would be a problem. I would guess it would work better if the moon were visible at the time. What’s the weather going to be tonight, does anyone know?”

LEARNING THE WORLD

Matt got out his portable computing device. “Stormy,” he answered.

“Ah well, maybe tomorrow. Still, waiting a day or two is easier than my plan. So let’s do that.”

With that plan agreed upon the three went to their respective groups to practice and then home, as normal.

Wait, if you can’t even do that for two days, go and see about the shape shifting thing. There are Zephyr people all over the place, pick one!

The only event of note the next day was that another student was reported missing, a seer named Carolyn.

At least it’s ‘missing’ and not ‘killed,’ thought Elizabeth. *Maybe she saw something bad happening to her and decided to hide out.*

I hope you’re right, I thought.

That night the moon was almost full and it was quite a bit warmer than everyone expected, so Elizabeth and Socks snuck out after almost twenty minutes of chanting.

“I don’t know how long this will take, but at least I should be able to talk to the moon spirit for three hours at this point,” she explained. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t take that long.”

In fact it hardly took any time at all, as only a few minutes later Elizabeth opened her eyes and exclaimed “I think it worked!”

She pulled out her computing device and started scrolling across a map, zooming in and out.

“No, not there. That’s too far out. Wait, there’s that pool that’s covered, I got a vision of that. It was nearby, that way... hey, it’s right near Matt’s house. What are the odds?”

“Let me see, I’ll need to know the closest point to teleport to.”

“Oh, I can do better than that,” she replied with a smirk.

She texted him. *Hey Matt, send me a picture of your room. It’s right next door. Hurry.*

A moment later a picture appeared on the screen, and she showed it to Socks. “Got it.”

He changed into a middle aged man and took her hand.

“Ever teleported before?”

“I followed a devil once who teleported into another room.”

“So then you know what to expect. Hang on!”

They were gone, and I willed myself to their new location. Sam was there, already out of his body.

“Quick, I’ll give you all the moon spirit. Get that baku here while I do. We’ll phase in through the wall, and then... I have no idea.”

“Just get to the lights,” said Socks, back in his cat form. “And hit it hard with whatever you’ve got.”

I’ve got... a barrier? thought Elizabeth. *Well, maybe it’ll do something I can emulate.*

She chanted for two minutes while Matt petitioned the baku, who appeared and glared at Socks some more.

“Settle that later,” Matt admonished. “We’re after a bogey right now.” The baku seemed to perk up, and crouched down so they could get on his back.

Apparently insubstantial things can hold on to each other as they all leapt through the wall of the house, and sped towards the house Elizabeth pointed at. Socks followed closely behind out the window.

Jumping in through the wall, the group came face to face with a serpent looking creature that was furry. It had two different legs, two different arms, and two different horns. Bizarre. It seemed to be breathing in some sort of dark energy around the girl who was whimpering in her sleep. The creature looked up.

Sam took the initiative by leaping off the baku’s back and swinging at it. The form slipped past him, and Sam went sprawling, smashing a hole through the wall and ending up in the hallway.

“Hit the lights!” Socks yelled, pointing. Matt stumbled off towards the light but Sam’s arm reached into the room and flipped the switch on. Elizabeth nimbly hopped down so the real baku could attack, which it did. She glanced around the room, probably looking for more lights to turn on. Socks turned into a baku again, and Elizabeth smiled, and turned into one herself. The creature started backing away, confused. Meanwhile, Sam was back in the room swinging his fists at nothing and Matt was shouting about spiders in the room. The two baku leapt on the creature which was now changing form into some sort of amalgamation of darkness and animal parts and started trying to tear it apart. They both hit, but shallowly.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Snap out of it,” yelled Elizabeth to Sam. “Where are you swinging? It’s over there.”

“Oh yeah. Weird,” replied Sam, gathering himself for another blow against the creature. Suddenly, it shimmered and disappeared, and Elizabeth did the same, a split second after becoming herself again.

They must have teleported, I thought, willing my armor to take me where her signal now was.

To my surprise, I got an error message across my visor, something I had only seen once before. Here. I sighed, then realized that was another mannerism I had picked up from these beings.

“Signal lost,” it printed.

The others jumped onto the back of the nearest baku and both wavered and vanished just like she did. The girl woke up and looked around, panicked, but seeing the light on reassured her a little. Then she saw the huge hole in the wall and started screaming. I heard two people running up the stairs to get to her room, but tuned that out. Elizabeth and her friends had just gone somewhere- but where? Obviously not anywhere on the local star system as I could easily trace them anywhere that close. That left only one option; that strange world I had seen the spirit hunter open a portal into. That world or sub-dimension or whatever the people here called it was obviously a bit out of my reach at the moment. I had a few options, but I didn’t like any of them very much. I could check on every spirit hunter in the world to see if any were currently opening portals like that, and go through myself. Then pick up the signal and get over to where she was. The flaw with that plan was that these humans seemed to be able to alter their vibrational pattern to an extreme extent. Shifting only a little made them effectively invisible to everyone else. To actually step into what amounted to a separate universe... that was a little tricky. Even for me. Somehow these portals they used adjusted them somehow, but how would one react if I stepped through?

The two adults, most likely the girl’s parents, were marveling at the hole in the wall, which mirrored my plight a little. How did I make a hole in the wall of the universe? And then change my vibrational frequency so I didn’t get torn apart? Adjusting my visor to compensate and see them was one thing, but this was quite another. My armor could do a lot of things, but this was fundamental to the universe- something these humans didn’t seem to have a lot of respect for.

While my armor ran various simulations of what would happen if I tried to follow, they suddenly reappeared! By this time the two adults had left again, promising to start repair in the morning, and the little girl was trying to get to sleep again. Oddly, there seemed to be one extra person with them, and it turned out to be the missing seer. I was a little annoyed I hadn't gotten to see how they handled the creature, then brightened as my probe started downloading Elizabeth's brain patterns for that time. I could look them over during her dormancy period! I was glad they were where I could keep an eye on them, and safe again.

Or so I thought.

They were speaking in hushed tones and about to all leave the room via the wall as they did before, when another voice rang out.

"Hold on, don't go just yet!"

Into the room stepped three figures, one human in a red cloak, and two others I recognized as the type of creature the group had fought in the farmhouse. The girl in the bed of course bolted upright and drew in a breath to scream, but one of the figures pointed to the girl and she instantly fell asleep. Elizabeth pointed to the human, who flinched back a little, but stayed conscious.

"That was odd," he said.

"You're telling me," Elizabeth replied. "That usually works."

"Anyway, I must thank you for finding my wayward seer. I was all set to kill her when she up and disappeared on me. Guess now we know what happened, huh?"

"Stay away from her, Derek," snarled Elizabeth. "I can't believe you went Dark Side. Murdering people? Is that really where you want to take this?"

"What do you care? Unlike some I'm not afraid of using my powers. How did you all escape from those dogs I sent after you, anyway?"

"We apparently have something you don't. Friends to back us up."

"Oh, these two? They'll do what's required, don't worry. I don't need friends, I have power. In fact, let me show you!"

He pointed a finger at Matt and a brief circle of light appeared in the air at the tip. I saw Matt's angel become tangible and deflect a stream of fire with his wing, while Elizabeth countered the attack with her own. The fire she produced hit him square in the chest, and thoughts of victory and horror went through her mind as he was hit. He didn't seem to mind it though as the fire passed through his body and set the wall behind him on fire. He began fading away, and looked down at his chest.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Huh. That’s interesting,” he managed before he was completely gone.

The Devils did their best to kill off the seer before they were defeated, but in the end they were taken down by the baku and Sam. Sam, of course, showed his usual restraint and punched a hole straight through the floor as he destroyed the demon that had been knocked over. Matt hauled him out of the wreckage.

By this time Matt had petitioned Iris again to try and get the flames out on Carolyn, and the house was filling up with smoke. Being immune to fire, the phoenix just beat the flames down with his wings, but Carolyn was still badly burned. Beeping noises were coming from the hall, which I assumed was some sort of alarm system, and the contents of the room were heavily damaged from all the fighting.

“Come on,” shouted Elizabeth, running for the wall. “They’re coming up here, and we can’t explain all this!” She phased through the wall and into the night. Matt wrapped Carolyn up in the heavy covering from the bed and threw the window open, allowing Iris to carry the bundle out into the night. They all phased through the wall and I went with them, wondering if the night would have any more surprises.

Willpower

I'll just have one more cookie...

After the group sped around Matt's house to get out of sight, they took stock of what else should be done that night.

"I have to make sure there aren't any more of those things around," remarked Elizabeth. "You guys go in and get warm or whatever. I'll stay out here for maybe another half hour and see if Moon spots anything."

"I'm not sure it would be the best thing for my parents to walk in and find a girl in my room," said Matt. "Especially two guys, one girl."

Carolyn started blushing.

"But I can at least get you some warmer clothes."

Matt climbed back into the window while Elizabeth moved a little way off, looking up at the moon. He returned with a pair of jeans, a heavy sweatshirt and a blanket, which he handed over to Carolyn.

"Thanks," she said, looking down.

"What exactly am I going to tell my parents about where I've been?" she asked after she was dressed. She had also gotten some healing from Socks, who had turned into yet another person for the occasion.

How many forms does he have, anyway?

"We're going to have to arrange some protection for you. Sadly I think the society is our best bet at the moment."

"What society?"

"Spirit hunter society. One of the larger supernaturally active groups in the world. Sam is a spirit hunter, so if he's any indication, they can get pretty powerful."

LEARNING THE WORLD

“What’s this get stuff? You think I’m not now?”

“Anyway, I’ll call my contact, Rosalita, and see if she has any ideas.”
They all turned.

“Sirens. Sounds like the fire fighters will be here shortly,” said Carolyn. “It’s so hard to believe. First I get kidnapped by some nightmare creature who by accident keeps that freak Derek from finding me. Then when I get rescued, he shows up out of nowhere and tries to kill me.”

“I know. Things have been happening while you’ve been missing. Some of your other seer friends have been killed, I’m sorry to say. Probably by Derek, now that he’s tipped his hand.”

“What about the ones that stopped using their powers? Did they get killed?”

“No, actually he’s left them alone. Which I guess is odd, considering. Maybe there’s still a little bit of conscience in there, after all.”

“Then I’ll just give them up too. I lived for thirteen years without them, I can not use them now.” She turned and looked up at the sky. “You hear me Derek? I won’t use them, okay?”

“I don’t know if that’ll work. Rosalita? Hi, it’s Matt...” He moved off to talk on the phone, leaving Sam and Carolyn awkwardly staring at each other.

“So you’ll really give them up, huh?” he asked.

“If that’s what it takes. I never wanted these weird powers anyway so it’s no big loss.”

“I wonder if I could give them up,” he mused.

Matt came back over. “She said she was already on her way. I’m going over there to meet her. She guessed it was something to do with us given how close to my house it was.”

“She probably would have guessed it was us regardless.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Matt wandered over across the street for a few minutes once the fire trucks arrived and took care of the blaze.

After a half hour passed and things quieted down across the street, Elizabeth announced the moon spirit saw no more creatures wandering around in the night. However, she needed to get home in case her mother had checked on her and found her missing. She loaded Matt up with energy so he could keep his angels around as long as possible, and had Socks teleport her back home. Almost immediately Matt asked him to come back, he

had a favor to ask, and Elizabeth said she would be fine. She thanked him for his help, and he vanished again.

She cautiously looked around the house but everything seemed normal, so she had not been missed. She got out her secret journal.

Blindly emulating powers can get me in trouble, she wrote. As was the case tonight. I also learned a bit more about the ability. Like the time I accidentally possessed Sam, it wore off after a while. But Socks said my stepping into Purgatory like I did wouldn't have worn off. I just would have been stuck there. Good thing baku can tail things across planes like that, and then get back, or we would all have been in trouble. I kept chasing that bogey until it finally led me to where Carolyn was. It actually spoke to me. "Stop chasing me," it said, like it was afraid! Imagine that, a creature that feeds on fear afraid of little old me. It was Sam and the two baku that did most of the work, which is fine with me, I guess? Still, it got me thinking about what would have happened if they weren't there.

I need to do something about this Elizabeth problem in case something like this happens again. Now that I think about it though, if they hadn't shown up, I could have called her out. She would probably have been thankful for the excitement. I've sort of given up on anyone from Zephyr being able to help. I had a really interesting thought though. What is my power doing, anyway?

Tonight I called on the Moon spirit and got abilities I don't have normally. So where does that power come from? And then there's Anthy and Elizabeth themselves: where are they right now? I could close my eyes and talk to either of them if I wanted, so they're around. I put some spirit energy into making their form and they pop out of me. So here's the question: could I put those two techniques together somehow? Call on the Moon spirit, but instead of completing the ritual and bestowing that power on myself or others, focus it through the calling out of my spirit projection. Wouldn't that give Moon a physical form?

I'm thinking yes! Can't wait to try it out.

That weekend Elizabeth wrote to Matt to see how the rest of the night went around his house, and he said fine.

Socks is now protecting Carolyn, he wrote.

That's good. She probably couldn't have a better guardian.

She's sworn off her powers, if that means anything.

LEARNING THE WORLD

Great, another seer, the only people that have any chance at all of finding out what's really going on, gets scared.

Can you blame her?

Yes, I can. We need to know, if you hadn't noticed. What happened to Derek anyway? Did I kill him?

Terathel doesn't exactly know. It was probably some kind of magic he set up beforehand. In case he got killed, it just put him back someplace.

I'm not sure if I should be relieved or not.

Up to you, I guess.

Remind me to give you some of these wards. With the bogey gone they may stop making them. I warded my room at least, you can ward yours. If you get some, you can pay me back and we'll both do our whole houses.

Thanks!

No problem. Have to get to work, had a great idea for a new technique. Have to see if it'll actually work!

Good luck.

Elizabeth spent the rest of the day, that evening, and then Sunday first finishing her homework and then in silent contemplation. She had some talks with Anthony about exactly what she was, but I don't think either had the language to even ask the right questions. I didn't even know what Anthony was from the scans I taken, so I didn't know what chance they had of figuring it out. Nevertheless, Sunday evening came to find her doodling in a notebook. She was drawing circles labeled "spirit energy" and "spirits" and "motive force" when she suddenly started drawing a lady with long hair. She started filling in details about her body, and concentrated on it. She started chanting the familiar Moon spirit ritual, but began waving her arms as well.

To both of our surprise, the woman in the picture appeared before her, startling her and causing her to pitch over backwards off her bed, onto the floor. The woman was floating a few inches off the floor, and just as in the picture, her hair was gently waving as if blown by a breeze. Her skin was luminescent, and her face seemed to hold the potential for great beauty, if only Elizabeth could fill in the details.

"Ow," she said, rubbing her head. She heard a noise outside her room.

"Hide!" she hissed to the construct, who bowed a little and phased through the wall of her room to the outside. The door opened.

“Are you okay in here?” asked her brother, looking sideways at her sprawled out on the floor.

“I just, I thought I saw a spider coming down at me,” she said, picking herself up again. “I’m fine.”

He looked around the room. “Okay, if you’re sure.”

He left again.

She waited a moment and opened her window as quietly as possible. On the other side was the construct, just floating there and looking up at the moon.

“Oh wow,” she said. “Now if I can just remember how I did that. You can come back in now,” she said to it. It nodded again and came back through the wall.

“I can feel you,” she said to it. “I’m maintaining your existence, that’s for sure. Can you talk?”

It shook its head.

“Anthy can’t, so I guess that’s to be expected. But Dizabeth could. Weird. Anyway, you’ll help me if I need it, right?”

It nodded.

She took its hand. “Amazing. It’s like holding moonlight. I’m Liz, nice to meet you.”

The construct touched its chest and then Liz.

“Oh, you’re a part of me, is that what you’re saying?”

It nodded.

“Still, you’re also partly the Moon spirit. And you’ve been helping me, so this way I get to thank you in person. So thanks.”

It shimmered and was gone.

“Okay!” said Elizabeth happily. “Now that’s something useful.”

Hold on to your hats gentleman, she wrote to Sam and Matt. I finally have something cool to show you guys tomorrow.

Odd, because I hadn’t really seen either of them wear hats.

Coming into school Monday it seemed the members of Zephyr were still doing something to the school building. It almost seemed a waste to put all that effort into protecting a building they wouldn’t be staying at in the long run. Some deaths had happened there so maybe it was worth it? Still, I believed the effort would have been better spent tracking down the cause. Maybe they had no means of doing that though, so this was the best they could do.

LEARNING THE WORLD

After school Elizabeth excitedly pulled Sam and Matt behind the building to show them the Moon spirit construct she had reasoned out.

“It just so happens I have something to show off as well,” said Sam. “I’ve finally gotten the hang of something Mordecai has been trying to get me to do. Wait until you see it!”

“Well, by all means, Sir!” said Elizabeth, giving a deep bow. “Please dazzle us then. But make it quick, I have to get to my tutoring class. You’ll see why in a minute.”

“Very well,” he said, sitting down by the base of the school and going vibrationally separate again. “Here we go. Strike them down by the thousands, Minoaha!” he yelled, and he was suddenly holding what looked like an enormous jawbone made of gold. “Ha, got it. Top that then!”

“What... teeth... thing...” Elizabeth managed.

“It’s my advanced weapon,” said Sam, a little hurt.

“Isn’t it a little hard to swing around?” asked Matt, curious.

“It’s basically part of my soul, so I don’t have any trouble using it. It’s learning to actually wield it that will be the tricky part.”

“It’s your Anthy?” asked Elizabeth. “How about that.”

“So show us what’s so great that you’ve come up with.”

“Gladly. And unlike some, I learned this all on my own. I don’t even know if Marina can do it. I only thought of it because I can’t call out Anthy, so only someone like me would have even considered it. So there.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and mentally went back to Sunday night in her room. *What do you feel when you did it?* she asked herself. *That’s the key. Feel it out, and persuade the power to take form.* She stared chanting, and redirected the energies inside herself again. The Moon spirit materialized before her again.

The spirit gave a little twirl in the air and bowed to both boys.

“Oh,” said Sam. “Okay, I guess that is pretty cool.”

“You just petitioned that or something?” asked Matt.

“Nah,” she replied. “It’s sort of like playing the accordion and the harmonica at the same time. I have to mentally direct her what to do. That’s not to say I have to focus on it, but if I didn’t tell her to, say, attack something, she would just stand there. But once I gave her the command, she would do whatever I wanted. It’s sort of a cross between my spirit projection and calling out a spirit.”

“That is pretty amazing,” admitted Matt. “Does it have special powers?”

“When I envisioned her I kept coming back to her hair,” she explained. “Watch.”

Suddenly the construct's hair shot out and wrapped around Sam's weapon. He easily pulled it free. "Doesn't seem very strong," he remarked.

Elizabeth snorted. "You have a skewed perspective on strength. Anyway, I think she's only as strong and fast and whatever as I envision her to be. So it'll take some practice and filling in the details in my head before she can really help out. I kept coming back to poison for her somehow too. So I think she can poison people she touches with her hair, but of course I've never tried it. I'm still excited about it though. You see why I need to hurry and learn a second spirit, I want to see if I can do it again!"

"Are you going to tell Marina about it?"

"Heck no, are you kidding? This technique is all mine. If these guys turn out to be evil like Jeremy thought and we have to fight them, I'm going to need every trick I can pull out."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that though," said Sam.

"Of course. See you both later!" The construct shimmered and vanished, and Elizabeth ran off. I followed.

The class was currently being taught the Thunder spirit, which apparently could convey the ability to throw lightning bolts. Elizabeth wasn't really impressed, after all she was still not learning how to throw energy bolts on her own. She didn't need the help of a spirit to do that.

But maybe if Matt could defend himself a little better, she thought, He wouldn't have to rely so much on angels. Not that I think they mind.

She also had in her head a vision of a huge bird, swooping down on enemies and firing lightning down while she rode its back. "Okay!" she said, "let's learn this thing!"

"You seem quite chipper this afternoon," remarked Marina.

"Something has finally gone right," said Elizabeth, "and I'm ready to learn!"

Culture

The culture in our genes is being awakened.

The next afternoon, Carolyn sat down next to the group at lunch, looking worried.

“Hi Lyn,” said Matt cheerfully. “Everything going okay?”

“Not really,” she answered. “It seems my powers won’t be denied.”

“You’re going to help us look for Derek after all?” asked Sam. “I knew you’d come around. All for one, right?”

“No. I’m not going to consciously use my powers again,” she said, looking around and quieting her voice. “But seers have dreams sometimes. Dreams they know are more than just dreams. I thought you should know what I dreamed about.”

“And what’s that?”

“I think Jeremy was right, the people in Zephyr aren’t human. I also glimpsed Derek pleading for his life. He got run through by, the closest I can put into words is “a ghost with a sword.” I didn’t get the impression that he was in control anymore. Like he didn’t turn to evil, something forced him into it. Part of him is still trying to break away from it I think. That’s all I know.”

“A ghost with a sword sounds like our buddies in spirit hunter society,” said Elizabeth. “Apart from those with jawbones, most of them carry swords, right?”

“Jaw- never mind. I guess?”

“I wouldn’t mind them taking care of things for us,” said Matt, “But if he has been taken over by something he summoned, we should try to help him.”

“Sadly, unless there’s more, none of this actually does help us find him,” said Elizabeth.

“That’s all there was. I don’t know if it’ll be useful, but like I said, I felt you should know.”

“Thanks for trusting us with this,” said Matt. “We do appreciate it.”

“Sure. See you around, Matt.”

“OOOOOh, she didn’t say see you around *Sam*,” said Elizabeth when she walked away. “I think someone has a little... crush?”

“Stop it,” said Matt, looking away.

“Oh, I think someone else does as well. If I ran around half naked would I- I am not going to take that thought any further. So, does that change anything?”

“If we find him, yes.”

“Hopefully no one at this table would think of just murdering him,” she said, looking pointedly at Sam. “But the society certainly has a better chance of finding him than we do. Them supposedly being professionals, and all.”

“I suppose I should tell Rosalita about it.”

“Wouldn’t hurt. More immediately though, are there other summoners around school?”

“Yeah, I think there’s two, why?”

“We know Heaven can’t help us, or at least you don’t know what angel to call that can. Let’s talk to the other side, see what they have to say.”

“I’m not sure I approve of this plan,” said Sam.

“That’s okay, it’s Matt’s job anyway, as he has no after school activities to go to.”

“I guess I could at least ask them if they know what could have made him fade away like that when Liz hit him with that fire technique.”

“Exactly. See what you can learn about summoning, how they didn’t get taken over while Derek did. Presumably they all learned the same stuff.”

“They would have all been in the same tutoring group, yeah. Okay, I’ll see what they have to say.”

“Good man!”

After school the three got on the late bus.

“So, what did you find out?”

Matt shook his head. “I ran into Socks on the way there, he told me some disturbing things.”

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“Great, this should be good news.”

“Not so much. Apparently he’s been taking your advice to heart, Liz, and studying the members of Zephyr when he gets a chance.”

“Right, I said he should just turn into one of them and solve the mystery. Glad he finally got around to it.”

“He said he tried, but he actually couldn’t.”

“I thought he said he could turn into anything!”

“He thought so too. The only things he can’t turn into are things that were created before the bakenako. As in, when the All-Father was still messing around with creating angels and the first humans and stuff.”

“So they’re old, is what he’s saying?”

“Not just that. His words were ‘that means they are more powerful than me.’”

The two looked at him.

“Okay, that’s specific,” said Elizabeth, when Matt said nothing more. “What does that mean in this context? We know they can die, a group of thirteen year olds killed one, so they can’t be that powerful. Take Sam here, he’s way stronger than me. I can’t punch stuff dead like he can. But then, he can’t start a minor earthquake by not concentrating on holding back his power. Which of us than is ‘more powerful?’”

“We’ll have to get some clarification there, I guess. He’s gone back to report to the Watchers. Also to try and find out where this Foundation has been hiding.”

“Yeah, everyone that mentions that place says they’re busy with their own stuff. Maybe their stuff is our stuff just in a different location. It would be nice to know. You look troubled Sam, unburden yourself.”

“It’s just Mordecai was acting weird this afternoon. After I told him about my fight with the bogey and with Derek, he was going on about something ‘being here soon’ and ‘choosing sides’ or something. He acted like he had said too much and just said he would look into the Derek thing some more. I don’t know.”

“That sounds a bit ominous,” remarked Matt.

“You’re telling me. I think you’ve got the right idea, Elizabeth. You should get all the tricks you can, and fast. Because I think something bad is coming, and we’re all going to need to be ready.”

Sadly, Socks did not return by the beginning of the next week, which made Matt a bit anxious that Lyn was unprotected. At the same time nothing happened to her, so either Derek was unable to act because of the disappearing

act he was forced into, or knew Lyn wasn't trying to track him down. I put a higher probability on the first case, just because she wasn't looking for him now didn't mean anything. If he had turned to evil, and I had some experience dealing with beings that had, he wouldn't leave a potential enemy alive to cause trouble. At least, if he was even somewhat intelligent.

The rest of the week passed and the group was looking forward to their field trip to the museum coming up on Monday. By the weekend Elizabeth had mastered the thunder spirit and was hard at work trying to materialize it. She did the same thing as with her "Strawberry Moon," as she called it, sketching out various forms and meditating on what form it might take. Sunday night she went outside and called it out, and got quite excited when it worked. It was a large bird like creature that crackled with electric power and stood cocking its head to look around. It stood about twice as tall as me, which was saying something, but didn't look... complete, I guess you would call it.

"I'll call you 'Rolling Thunder,'" Elizabeth said to it. "Not that you care, I guess."

It stared at her blankly.

"That's what I thought. Thanks for coming anyway." She dismissed the creature, and it vanished.

I'm finally starting to feel like a shaman, she thought. How cool is that? Even if I had to take matters into my own hands, and develop my own techniques. Now if I could just solve the Elizabeth problem that easily.

Give me what I want, Elizabeth thought at her, and we won't have any problems.

What you want is the problem.

When Monday arrived all the kids in 8th grade piled into busses and were taken to the nearby museum, which was showing an exhibit relating to a native culture that had been destroyed hundreds of years ago on this continent. As the kids wandered around slightly bored I marveled at their attitudes. Both the kids' and those who created such an exhibit. I wasn't sure if the sentiment was "We totally dominated the primitive culture that was here before us, look at how silly they were." or "We made a mistake. Here is all that's left of another people so let's make sure something like this doesn't happen again."

Perhaps a bit of both?

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In any case, during lunch Sam was missing for quite a while and Matt was beginning to get nervous about it when he suddenly looked around. Lyn and Jared were with them, awkwardly trying to make conversation as normally they wouldn't have really gone near each other. Both had given up their abilities for one reason or another, which did give them something in common, but it wasn't much.

"Did you guys hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked Elizabeth.

"Sounded like a crash."

"Oh yeah," said Lyn, "There was that section that was roped off, they're putting some new stuff out, right? Someone probably just dropped something."

"Probably something really, really expensive," sniggered Jared.

"I don't know," he said, looking around to see if anyone else had noticed. "I'm worried that Sam has been gone so long."

"If there's one person here that can take care of himself, I think it's him," remarked Elizabeth. "Anyway, even he wouldn't be stupid enough... to... leave his body and go wandering around for kicks?"

They all looked at each other.

"Yeah, I'm going to go check on him," said Matt. He got permission to use the bathroom and headed off.

"Is he that stupid?" asked Jared.

"I wouldn't say stupid, exactly, but maybe careless? He tends to be the sort that gets an idea and then just acts on it. He doesn't consider the consequences so much."

"I guess you're the exact opposite then," said Lyn.

"Pretty much. I want to think something through, figure out everything that can go wrong first, then act."

"Do you think Matt is sort of the middle ground then?"

"Never really thought about it like that, but maybe."

Several moments later both boys came back, and Sam actually looked bruised.

"What the heck happened to you?" asked Elizabeth.

"Some creature threw me through a wall!" he replied, sitting down.

"What, here?"

"I'm as surprised as you. I was sneaking around in that new section to see what they were doing--"

“As yourself?” gasped Lyn.

“No, in spirit form. I’m not that dumb. Anyway, I turned a corner and some creature was hunched over some dude in a suit, eating him up!”

“Yuck.”

“I know, right? Well I charged the... thing, and it just sort of tossed me through a wall. When I came to, the body and the creature were gone, like it had never happened.”

“That’s a good point, maybe it didn’t happen,” remarked Elizabeth.

“What do you mean?”

“We know ESPers can modify memories, right? So there’s an ESPer also sneaking around and spots you. Knows he’s been caught so uses telekinesis to throw you through a wall and then modifies your memory with the first thing that comes to mind. Runs away, you come to, and now have this wild story to tell.”

“I checked the area over, there was a little bit of blood on the carpet, so I think it did happen.”

“Or some red paint got spilled there during the renovation. Seriously, do you think some man eating creature is wandering around a museum during the day?”

“I admit it’s a stretch, I guess. But if it is true, we have to do something about it!”

Elizabeth looked over at the other two. “See what I mean?”

They both nodded. “Yup.”

“What?”

“Okay, let’s take it logically, okay? Assume there is a creature and he just ate someone, right?”

“I think he was eating the curator. He turned into him too.”

“How could you possibly know that? Weren’t you knocked out?”

“I saw his picture hanging around here someplace. I’m sure of it. He changed right after he saw me, yeah.”

“Right before you got knocked out? Sorry Sam, but if you really did black out, your brain wouldn’t have had time to store your short term memories and you wouldn’t have remembered those last few seconds.” Sam started to say something. “But maybe it works differently for you in spirit form, I don’t know. Of course, if you were in spirit form, getting thrown through a wall shouldn’t have done anything to you because the wall isn’t supernatural, and you are. But I digress. So a creature attacks and eats the curator, we’re assuming that to be true.”

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“Fine, don’t believe me.”

“I believe you believe what you saw. There’s just too many other supernatural things it could be. And stop interrupting. Curator, right? Let’s think about ‘doing something’ okay? First, half a dozen teachers are watching our every move, so how would we get away? Second it’s probably long gone by now. If I was eating people I wouldn’t stick around after someone saw me. Third it’s apparently stronger than you to throw you around like that, which I didn’t even think was possible.”

“It just surprised me, I think.”

“Uh huh. Sure. Let’s say we ignore all of that. You say it looks like the curator now, right? How do we ‘do something’ which by that I assume you mean ‘kill him without getting arrested for murder if someone sees us?’ Of course, if you’re wrong, you just murdered some guy, remember the farmer? We check first, then attack. Fifth (need I go on?) if he can change shape like you said he probably looks like someone else entirely so how will we ever find him again? Sixth, we’re just kids on a field trip. Isn’t this what the Watchers, you know, the people who have been trained to do this stuff, deal with all the time? Why should we stick our necks out to try and ‘do something’ about a creature we know nothing about?”

“I can tell you about it,” said Matt. “I can tell you what Terathel told me, anyway.”

“So what is it?”

“A ghoul, based on what Sam said. Kind of a nasty customer all around. Not a demon, just a creature of supernatural origins.”

“Any other major powers?”

“They can’t do magic or anything like that devil we fought.”

“So if you go about solving our six problems, Sam, I’ll be happy to assist you in this righteous quest. Otherwise, let the Watchers know about it and trust they’ll take care of it.”

“It might be too late by then!”

“I’ll call Rosalita, see what she has to say,” said Matt, moving a little ways off.

“Too late for what? It’s the bus situation all over again. I mean the guy is dead, Sam, you had your chance to help him and you blew it. No offense. Besides, maybe he was a bad guy and deserved it.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know that cows are murdered by someone so I can eat hamburger. Doesn’t mean I want to hunt down the person responsible.”

“It was a person, not a cow.”

“Granted, but it was also a creature that needs to kill to eat, just like me. How can I pass sentence on it? I’m no judge, or jury. You can’t just take matters into your own hands, Sam.”

“Haven’t you read Spider-Man? We’ve been given a power, it’s our duty to use these powers to help when we can.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Haven’t you read Superman? If that logic was correct, Clark Kent wouldn’t exist. How many people die while Mr Kent sips coffee on his break up in the newsroom?”

“I- It’s- That’s-” Sam sputtered. “Fine. I’ll just do it myself.”

“Like I said, solve my six problems and I’m happy to help. You’ve got ten minutes until lunch is over, think fast.”

Matt came back over. “She’s busy with something right now, so no help from that quarter.”

“Probably sipping coffee,” Sam said sarcastically.

“It’s certainly possible,” replied Elizabeth.

“You’re with me, right?” he asked Matt.

“I can sneak away and summon Tabeyume. He’s unseen, so he can scout around for us and hopefully keep an eye on the ‘new’ curator.”

“Great. At least some people are willing to help.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “It’s not nighttime, or outside where it’s cloudy. It’s not underground. Nothing I can materialize is unseen. If a teacher sees I’m missing, they’ll start looking and I’ll get in trouble. What, exactly, do you want me to do? You’ve seen everything I can do, so tell me what power to use, and I will do it. Otherwise it’s just me wandering around the museum, totally helpless against the thing you said tossed you around like a rag doll. Doesn’t seem all that logical to me.”

Sam just glowered at her.

“Yup, I definitely see what you mean,” said Lyn as Matt scuttled off to try and slip away.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” snapped Sam.

“Oh, nothing.”

“I don’t suppose you could use your seer powers to help us?”

“Well,” she hedged, “it probably doesn’t have anything to do with Derek, so he probably wouldn’t mind. No, I said I wasn’t going to, and I’m not going to. Sorry.”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Just as the teachers were doing a roll call, Matt slipped back in and indicated he was there.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Nice timing,” remarked Elizabeth. “So what’s the word?”
“He’s scouting around at least, we’ll see what he comes up with.”

Which in the end turned out to be nothing, as an hour or so later the kids were gathered up again and marched onto their busses to be taken back to school. The curator stopped by to say a few words, and he seemed normal enough, though he did keep glancing over at Sam rather pointedly. After that they got on the busses and were driven back.

“Glad to see all that ‘doing something’ amount to- oh wait, it didn’t,” said Elizabeth. “What happened to Tabeume anyway?”

“He was there, didn’t you see him? I couldn’t tell what he was trying to get at, so I dismissed him. I can’t keep him out forever, you know?”

If you needed energy, I would have been happy to give you some, thought Elizabeth. *Oh well, just ignore the things I can do and make me feel guilty I can’t just snap my fingers and solve every little thing Sam comes up with.*

“So we’ll just have to do something tonight!” said Sam.

“Shall I add number seven? How do we get anywhere once we’re home? Let’s see, number eight; do you know where this guy lives? Will he go to the curator’s house or back to his ghoulish pad?”

“Okay, I get the point. I’ll drop it.”

“Do you? Really?”

“Can’t you do that moon thing you did with the bogey?”

“I’m happy to try it, but honestly the bogey was a supernatural area of dark energy wandering around the place. This is just going to be some random dude. It might not work.”

“Better than nothing. I thought you’d be more interested in stopping some evil creature running around than this.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Was it evil, or just hungry? Why do you ascribe our system of values to a supernatural creature? A hungry lion might eat a person, are all lions evil?” She sighed. “Let me put it this way: Why do people cry at funerals?”

“Because they’re sad at losing someone?”

“Sure, but think about it. All their lives they were told ‘Heaven this’ or ‘reincarnation that.’ If they really, truly believed in that stuff, would they be quite as sad? I think not. I think that deep down people don’t believe that at all. We know differently now. In fact we’re some of the only people on Earth that know the actual, real, factual truth of the matter. The guy sitting next to you can wiggle his fingers and call down actual angels. Doesn’t get more real than that.”

Sam looked away, scowling.

“If that guy was an okay dude, he’s tooling around Heaven- *right now*. It goes back to what I said to the spirit hunters that time. Why exist here at all when that paradise is waiting for us if we live a good life? All or most of his family is there, or will be soon, from his perspective. So is he really that badly off? So excuse me for not wanting to stick my neck out for someone I don’t know who is now way better off. Especially against something that physically knocked you out.”

That’s right, I thought. If this creature was so bad why didn’t it just finish Sam off while he was unconscious? Strange...

“You almost sound, I don’t know, jealous of him. For dying.”

“I don’t know, Sam. I honestly don’t know what I’m feeling right now. He certainly doesn’t have any more troubles, but it seems every day brings us some new ones.”

Once back at the school the day finished up and some tutoring classes began, which Elizabeth went to. She approached Marina, her shaman tutor.

“There was a problem at the museum today,” she started.

“Oh, what’s that?”

“Sam said he saw a ghou, and it’s now in the form of the curator, because it ate him, apparently.”

“That’s certainly terrible news. Do you feel up to tackling it?”

“I guess? Matt said it didn’t have any magical powers like the devil we almost got killed by. Remember him? The one the spirit hunter had to save us from? Anyway, together we could probably handle it, if it wasn’t for the eight or nine logistical problems we would have to tackle beforehand.”

“It’s up to you of course. This is why we’re training you after all. All right class, let’s see how you’re doing with the Thunder spirit, shall we?”

Okay, she doesn’t seem too concerned, thought Elizabeth. I guess that means I shouldn’t be either. Of course all the seers said that Zephyr was evil, so maybe they wouldn’t. But then why send us to kill demons? This situation is so messed up...

That night Elizabeth did her homework and waited until sundown. She snuck out of her house and started chanting the moon spirit chant,

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which she kept up for twelve minutes. She leaned back against the house and looked up into the night, then closed her eyes and concentrated. It didn't take long for her to open them again and exclaim, "It actually worked?"

ROBERT ZIEFEL

25

Underground

It's party time for all the little worms.

Moon spirit says something unnatural went into a building in the largest cemetery in the area. Think that's our guy? Elizabeth texted to Matt.

Could be, stand by. was the reply.

"After these messages, we'll be right back!" she singsonged.

A moment later her phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Sam was already on route to the museum to check things out."

"Idiot!" exploded Elizabeth. "Something tosses him about like a rag doll and he runs towards it? With no backup? Honestly, what is wrong with that guy? Does he have no sense at all?"

"I don't know. He says he'll head to the cemetery but it'll take a while on foot. Can you get there?"

"I have no idea. Let me try a few things, we'll see."

"Okay."

She set the phone down and took a couple of steps away from it. My sensors told me energy was building up inside her.

"Rolling Thunder- Materialize!" she shouted, and again the birdlike creature appeared. It turned around and she awkwardly climbed onto its back.

"Fly like the wind!" she shouted, pointing. The creature's wings pumped furiously, but it hardly got off the ground.

"Super," said Elizabeth sarcastically. "I was right. I need to improve my skills in calling you out before you can carry me. I wonder though..."

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She hopped down and went over to the phone.

“Still there?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Give me two minutes, I want to try something else.”

“Okay.”

She set the phone down and again started chanting the moon chant. This time my sensors told me an energy was gathering around the bird, and a minute later she hopped on its back again. Both seemed to get somewhat transparent and now the bird easily leapt into the air, carrying her. I stepped “left” and studied the pair. It seemed things that were insubstantial had less weight, but then, if it was insubstantial, how did the wings get any lift? Shouldn’t air pass right through them? Still, by now I was used to people breaking the laws of the universe as they saw fit, so I didn’t think too much off it and stepped “right” again. She spiraled upwards, obviously enjoying herself, but came down a moment later.

“It actually worked,” she exclaimed, excited. “I can get there, no problem.”

“I’ll be interested to see how you do it. I’ve been thinking about getting there myself, and I think I have it covered. Meet you there soon!”

“You got it.”

She called the moon spirit again, this time at least another ten minutes, thinking *Don’t know how long I’ll need, so I better give him the ability for some time. Rather not plummet to my death, which would be quite embarrassing.*

After that she took to the air again on the back of her giant bird, and winged towards the cemetery.

Good thing she picked that up, I thought as I kept pace with her. Rather odd that just yesterday she learned to materialize a bird, and the very next day she needed a bird. What if she hadn’t learned it? Or hadn’t even had the idea for mixing the two powers like she did? Strange.

Far below she saw Sam, and laughed as she shot by him, high above. “Later, slowpoke!” she shouted into the night.

She saw Matt as she approached the cemetery and landed near him. He looked up at the huge bird now sitting next to him.

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“That’s your new spirit?” he asked, impressed.

“Rolling Thunder, at your service,” she replied. “Who’s your new friend?”

“This is the sphinx Ocket,” he said.

“Nice to meet you,” said the sphinx.

“Nice to meet you too, thanks for coming to help.”

“My pleasure.”

“I don’t suppose you saw Sam on your way here, did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. He’s ages behind me.”

“Would you mind going to pick him up?” Matt asked Ocket. “He’s a spirit hunter, on foot, coming here.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to find. I’ll be back soon.” He zoomed off.

“Wow, that thing is fast! No wonder you got here so quick.”

“Yeah, I was slowing him down, too. So what does this spirit of yours do?”

“I think stuff relating to electricity. Maybe he’s immune to being hurt by it, and of course he’s big, and he can throw lighting bolts? I haven’t really tested it.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah, I was pretty shocked when I first saw him.”

“You were electrified?”

“I got charged up all right.”

“Anyway, what’s the plan?”

“I guess we just look around, see if I can recognize that building the moon spirit showed me. Then we hold Sam back until we can get some answers.”

The two didn’t wait long, as moments later Ocket and Sam swooped out of the sky.

“Nice of you to make the effort,” he said, looking at Elizabeth.

“I told you I would. And all my problems have been solved, with us being here. We all made it here, one way or the other. No people around to get in the way or get hurt by us fighting, etc, etc. I still don’t think we should go around murdering things, but if you’re determined to do this, the least I can do is back you up.”

“Okay then. Sorry I misjudged you.”

“Not a problem, just don’t do it again.”

“Noted. Now, let’s go see-”

“Whoa there, cowboy. Little bit more prep work to do before we set foot in there. Matt, how would you like to be able to throw lighting bolts?”

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“Sounds handy.”

“What about me?” asked Sam.

“I think your punching things is going to be better than this, but I’ll still give you the spirit. It deals with reflexes, so that’s all to the good.”

Elizabeth started chanting again, and my sensors picked up a rather large portion of energy being stored inside her while she did. She finished six minutes later and the energy rushed out of her, towards the two boys and herself. Sam experimentally punched the air. “I do feel a little faster,” he remarked.

“As far as the lighting goes, just sort of will it to happen, I guess. I’ve never done it, but if it’s the same as going insubstantial, that’s all you should need. You’ll still have to aim it, though.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Now can we go?”

“Now we can go.”

The three poked around the cemetery and Elizabeth consulted the moon spirit she was still under the guidance of, and narrowed the building down.

“This is it,” she said, as the three stood in front of it. The entrances were bricked up, and there was a stone slab in front on the ground.

“Want me to just bust into it?” Sam asked.

“Let’s see if we can do it the quiet way first. If this is the place, the creature got in somehow.”

They looked around, and Elizabeth stuck her head through the walls and then the slab. “Too dark to see anything,” she remarked. “Maybe the bust in plan is all we’ve got.”

“No, there must be something,” said Matt. “Hey Sam, you’re strong. Try lifting this stone out, will you?”

He shrugged and tried to get a grip on it, then strained to lift it.

“Something’s pulling it back down,” he said as he struggled. “I could force it if you wanted.”

“No, put it down, there must be a switch someplace!” said Elizabeth. Sam let the slab go and it gently sank into place again. “It could be anywhere, or be a ward or something.”

“I guess. If only we could see the other side of this rock. There must be some kind of release on the other side, so someone didn’t get trapped down there.”

“Why not use your cell phone?” asked Sam. “It makes enough light to see, right?”

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“Duh!” said Elizabeth, smacking her forehead. *I thought I was the smart one.*

She got it out and sank head first into the stone again. “Yup, there’s a lever down there,” she said, coming up. “But how do I reach it? I can’t make part of myself solid, it would fall off!”

“Can you climb down?” asked Sam.

“I’m afraid of slipping and just tumbling through the Earth forever,” she remarked.

“Oh.”

“Let me think...” She pondered. “Okay, I’ve got it!”

She stuck her head through again, and I felt power building inside her. “Strawberry Moon- Materialize!” she shouted, and lower down the passageway the first creature she had created appeared. It reached over and pulled the lever, which activated some kind of mechanism that started the stone rising.

“You know,” Elizabeth remarked as the stone opened and Strawberry Moon came up the stairs, “I’m finally starting to like being a shaman.”

“So do we just go in?” Sam asked, looking down into the gloomy stairs.

“Let me see what Anthy has to say about the whole situation first,” answered Elizabeth. She closed her eyes.

Do I follow her into that inner landscape of hers? I asked myself. *I guess it’s not necessary,* I decided. She opened her eyes a few seconds later.

“From what I can tell, the tunnels below are extensive, and there are some creatures running around the place. Also she feels a great evil down there, whatever that means.”

“Are ghouls that evil?” asked Matt.

“I don’t know. It could be someone from Zephyr. Everyone in the know seems to call them evil. And we know they’re ancient, right?”

“I don’t know,” said Sam, “That’s a little hard to believe. I mean, one of them being way out here would be a pretty big coincidence.”

“And it wasn’t a coincidence that you just happened to come upon a ghoulish eating someone in the middle of the day, at a museum of all places?” said Elizabeth.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Oh, well, if you're going to argue with logic...”

“Terathel says ghouls probably wouldn't fit the description in this case,” remarked Sam. “He adds there's nothing really supernatural about this graveyard, for what that's worth.”

“It's something,” said Elizabeth. “What really worries me is that there could be more than one of these creatures down there.”

“I can handle them!”

“You couldn't handle one, but that's not the point. Did you get a good enough look at the one in the museum to pick him out of a lineup in case he's not shape shifted anymore?”

“They're ghouls, not bank robbers.”

“They're living things, not machines,” Elizabeth spat back. “If three of them have never killed a living thing in their lives and you go down there and slaughter all of them, who's in the wrong then, huh? Here's a hint, it's you.”

“But they eat the dead!”

“Uh, news flash, so do you, Sam. Except for all those fruits and vegetables you eat; which you eat while they're still alive. It's all just food by that point.”

“Look,” said Matt, stepping between them, “Let me see what Terathel has to say.

“Uh huh. Really? That make sense. Right... I guess...”

“That kinda freaks me out when he does that,” Elizabeth remarked.

“Okay, here's what he says. Heaven sees eating of human flesh by other humans as almost as bad as murder. He says they aren't much better than just animals, even though they were technically human at one time. But they sort of gave up being human during their rituals and things a long time ago. So killing them doesn't really count as murder in the eyes of Heaven.”

Wait a second, before, during the ghost thing, the angel said it was just a body and there was no connection to the “soul” of the man turned ghost. This implied it was no different from any other dead animal. Now the angel is saying eating this certain dead animal is regarded as the same as murdering another human? The longer I stayed here, the less I understood the “rules” of this place, honestly. Was it any wonder Elizabeth was so confused all the time?

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Okay,” said Elizabeth slowly, seeming not convinced. “So if they’re more animal like now you can’t apply human standards, and eating dead people isn’t a sin for them. Right? You can’t have it both ways. And not to put too fine a point on it, Matt, but if you’ll recall, Terathel said we should kill Socks, too. And he turned out just fine, right? So you’ll have to forgive my not taking his immediate word on things now. Anyway, these ghouls are either human, and killing them is wrong or they are not and them eating a person is just like a tiger doing it. Sad, but its just being a tiger. Either way I’m still a shaman, and I’m supposed to respect life and protect it. I don’t care if it’s a tiger that got loose from a zoo and ate some kid or this ghoul that came and ate a man. I would still feel guilty about killing the creature.”

“But it would have to be done,” said Sam.

“The problem is these things are intelligent, at least to a degree the tiger isn’t. And you have no proof the ghoul actually killed the guy or not. He could have been shot, or had a heart attack or forgotten to take his insulin and had a donut. He could have been dead ten minutes before the ghoul showed up. You don’t know.”

Sam seemed to have no comeback for this.

She is right, after all, I thought.

“Is that the real reason you’ve been so against this from the start?” asked Matt.

“Yes, I think it is,” she replied. “Sam here is playing judge, jury and executioner in this situation, and I think it’s a bad precedent to set.”

“Some super hero you would make,” remarked Sam. “You see a bad guy, you punch the bad guy.”

“We aren’t super heroes, Sam. We’re middle school kids who got thrown into a world that’s way bigger than we ever imagined. There was a group that fancied themselves super heroes. Now what happened to them? Let me think- Oh right, Derek killed them all. And why was that? Because *power corrupts*, Sam. That’s us if we aren’t careful. Killers. Corrupted by our powers to believe that we’re doing the right thing when in reality we’re just another kind of bully. I won’t become that, Sam. I’ll die first, mark my words. Maybe you and Matt here have Heaven on your side or whatever, so you can do no wrong, but I have a demon in me. And that means I have to be extra careful because I can’t really be sure if wanting to do something is me talking, or Elizabeth somehow getting through. If that means being a little more critical of things, it seems a small price to pay.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

The three stared at each other in silence.

“Anyway, getting back to the ghouls,” said Matt.

“Yes. Other situations include him working for someone and being ordered to kill and turn into that guy for some reason. In that case, killing the ghouls means nothing because it’s the guy higher up that we need to go after.”

“So what are you saying?” asked Sam.

“I’m saying just don’t run in there and start punching stuff. Let’s see if they’ll talk first.”

“Fine, whatever. Can we just go?”

“Sure,” she replied, stepping down. “Be careful though, these stairs seem a little bit-” She yelled and stumbled, her hands pinwheeling through the air and tossing her cell phone, which tumbled through the air. Sam and Matt both tried to catch her but Matt also slipped, and crashed into Sam. Of course Sam hardly noticed and managed to grab onto Elizabeth and hauled her back up.

“You were saying,” he asked sarcastically.

“I was saying we should be careful. I think I’ve proven my point.”

“Right.”

The three more carefully made their way down the stairs and retrieved the cell phone, which at least seemed to be somewhat undamaged. She sighed, then gagged.

“It is gross down here!” she remarked, breathing through her mouth. “What is that smell?”

“I don’t think we want to know,” remarked Matt, looking a bit sick himself.

“I’m afraid we’re probably going to find out one way or the other,” said Sam. “Which way?”

The passageway went both to the right and left from the bottom of the stairs, and the trio peered ahead.

“I think there’s water coming from that way,” said Matt, pointing right.

“Water under a graveyard? That can’t be good. Let’s check it out,” said Elizabeth.

They didn’t have long to go before they came to a bricked up section of wall.

“Sewage,” said Matt, peering through a hole in the wall where some bricks had been removed. “Can’t go any farther this way.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Thus far it’s been a magical trip,” remarked Elizabeth. “I’m really happy to be here.”

The three went back and, passing the stairs on the left, Matt hissed “Shhhh.” The three stopped and listened. “I thought I heard something.”

“I don’t hear anything,” said Sam.

“Just keep an eye out.”

“Keep an eye out he says,” mumbled Elizabeth, swinging the light from her cell phone back and forth. “We aren’t the ones that can see in the freaking dark. Wait, hello? Is someone there?”

There’s a scabbling noise and two dark figures seemed to slither out of the light and retreated further down the tunnel. “Maybe they’re more scared of us than we are of them?” she asked, hardly sounding convinced.

“Let’s hope so,” said Matt. “I’m going to petition something, this is too creepy.”

He started praying and suddenly the baku Tabeume was literally filling the passageway in front of the group, which had narrowed as they’d been walking. He made a strangled noise and tried to wiggle out, but couldn’t. He looked forlornly over at Matt.

“Sorry! Sorry, I just, with the dark I didn’t judge the size of the passageway right, sorry, I’ll send you back.”

Isn’t one of his powers seeing perfectly in the dark?

The baku hung its head for a few seconds until it disappeared.

“Nicely done,” remarked Elizabeth. “That, uh, that really helped. I feel a lot better now. Yeah.” She was trying to laugh and not gag at the same time, which meant she was just kind of making a strangled noise.

“Just come on.”

Ahead, the dirt of the passageway turned into old, rough, stone, and widened a little. Brickwork was also in evidence, though very crumbled and falling apart. Strawberry Moon, now in the lead, spread a hand backwards and the three stopped.

“She saw something?” asked Matt.

“I can’t hear her thoughts, or anything,” replied Elizabeth. “What is it?” she whispered. Strawberry Moon pointed at a hole in the wall to the left. “Could be a trap,” Elizabeth remarked. “See if it’s safe.”

Moon nodded and stuck her head around the corner of the hole, then put an arm into it. She looked back and shrugged. “I think it’s safe.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

The three gathered around it and looked down the tunnel.

“It’s some sort of passageway,” remarked Sam.

“Yeah, if you’re something that moves on all fours. It’s only two feet high at best,” said Matt. “Where did the dirt go that came out of this hole?”

The others shook their heads and shrugged.

“If you want I can phase through the wall here insubstantially and see where it goes,” offered Elizabeth.

The others thought for a moment. “Nah, let’s stay to the main path here for now. But have her check any others as we pass though, I don’t want something jumping out of one at us.”

“Good idea. You can do that right?”

Moon nodded, and the group moved forwards again. They went past several more small passageways, quite regularly spaced, before it opened up considerably and they found the source of the smell.

“Oh wonderful,” remarked Elizabeth, looking the pile of bodies over. Most were skeletal, but a few had some rotting meat still attached. They had basically just been thrown into a heap, and were nearing the roof of the cavern. “We found their larder.”

“More like their garbage dump, judging from the bones. I guess they don’t eat the bones, huh?”

“Then where did the curator’s bones-” started Matt.

He was interrupted by a ghoul appearing from behind the pile and glaring at them.

“No we don’t like the bones just the soft squishy bits,” he said, and started cackling. Suddenly three others appeared from various shadows and holes in the walls and ceiling, making the three surrounded.

“Oh crap,” said Elizabeth as the one to speak stopped laughing and charged them.

Amphitheater

The theater, the theater.

The ghoul behind the group barked a command and the one that was running towards them stopped. He shrank back a little but raked a claw through the air at them. The group looked around nervously.

“So what brings you- oh, it’s you again!” exclaimed the one behind them. “Didn’t learn your lesson up there, huh?”

“You wanted to talk to them, go for it,” Sam whispered to Elizabeth.

I’m going to have to, aren’t I, thought Elizabeth. Dogs is one thing, but these creatures are killers. Plus they have us surrounded, outnumbered, and they’re all as strong as Sam! They’ll rip us apart.

“We came to find out why you took such a big risk coming to, well, the surface world. My friend here thinks with his fists and just wants to punish you. I want to understand you.”

“Oh, an inti- an inta- an intellectual. I respect that.”

“You do?!” Elizabeth was shocked.

“Sure, more tasty fat on a person that doesn’t get a lot of exercise.”

The others laughed along with him and edged closer.

“Can we eat them now?” said one.

“They came all this way,” said the other.

“Please, we don’t want to fight you unless we have to.”

“You really want to know why I did it?”

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t you want to try fresh food once in a while if all you had was rotten stuff?”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“That’s it? That’s your whole reason?”

“Seems logical to me.”

The others murmured agreement.

“But why that guy? He was just fatter?”

“Position of power! Easy to lure other prey, that’s all.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I don’t believe this.”

“Curiosity satisfied?”

“I guess, why?”

“Because now we eat!” he shouted, springing towards Sam.

“We don’t have to do this,” Elizabeth shouted, which was lost as the other three gave a whoop of joy and charged forward. The closest one sprang at Matt, and impacted his angel, which protected him. The ghoul seemed sort of surprised to not have torn bloody flesh away from Matt, and looked at him quizzically. He yelped and dodged as Elizabeth threw a bolt of lightning at him, which missed. Sam and the “leader” were grappling, neither one seeming to have an advantage over the other. Another one sprang for Elizabeth, but again Matt’s angel flickered into solidity and deflected it. Matt started praying.

Good thing they were standing so close together, I thought. Too late for Elizabeth’s barrier now though. I hope I don’t have to step in here.

Again the same puzzled reaction. The forth one had gone for Elizabeth’s construct and was currently ripping its arm off while it tried to get its hair around the ghoul.

“Leave her alone!” shouted Elizabeth, slamming that one with electricity. He bared his teeth at her but didn’t seem particularly hurt.

“Use that fire thing!” Matt shouted as the one facing him attacked again.

Fire... thing? Does he want her to call out her inner demon? That could just make this situation worse, if it decided to try killing Sam again.

As I looked over at Matt his angel’s club knocked the ghoul away and my sensors picked up an energy discharge. The ghoul shrieked and lunged away, on fire! The others looked over to see what was happening and Sam took that opportunity to smash the arm of the ghoul that was pinning him to the wall, breaking it. He also yelled in pain and frustration.

LEARNING THE WORLD

Oh, apparently he was talking to his “angel” which can somehow manifest fire as it strikes.

The ghoul that was attacking Strawberry Moon put its hands up and started backing away. The other one galloped over to the one on fire and started beating the flames out with his hands. My sensors registered an energy fluctuation and the sphinx from before appeared and looked around.

“Kill you!” yelled the one with the broken arm. “Kill you all and eat you!”

“I don’t think so,” said Sam, lashing out with a fist. It connected and splattered the ghoul across the passageway. He smirked.

Yeah, no danger of what Elizabeth was saying there, I thought. You would think he would feel a little remorse for the thing he just killed.

The sphinx stared at the one ghoul that was backing off, who seemed rooted in place now.

“We’ll leave,” he said. “No more trouble from us. My word! Yes, promise! It was all his fault!” He points to the dead one. “We told him not to go. Yes we did! Warned him no good would come of it. Honest!”

“You’ve never killed any humans to eat them?” Matt asked suspiciously.

“No, never. Just the dead. We’re good, don’t bother anyone!”

“You don’t leave the tunnels?”

“Uh...” his eyes dart around nervously. “To see the stars or walk about sometimes. Never seen! No, never seen by human eyes, us. Isn’t that right fellows?”

By this time the flames were out on the one, and he had gotten back up.

The damage looks like it’s already going away, these creatures must have a tremendous ability for regeneration.

“And it’s just the three of you?” Matt demanded.

“Yes, only three. Let us go, no more trouble!”

Odd. Do they have some unnatural fear of fire? I guess they aren’t too bright, after all. They could have swarmed Elizabeth easily out of his range, then gone after Sam. Then taken down Matt because he can only be defended from one at a time. Strange how they so quickly backed off.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Is he telling the truth?” he said, half turning to Elizabeth. She closed her eyes for a few seconds.

“As far as Anthy knows, yes. The tunnel is blocked off ahead, so they probably don’t go much further than this.”

“And you promise never to come to the surface to kill?”

“Yes, of course. Only he wanted to. We never did!” The others nodded their agreement.

“You aren’t just going to let them go?” snarled Sam.

Elizabeth looked down at the dead one. “You’ve done what you came here to do. Let’s let it go at that. I’m sure these fellows got the point.”

“Oh yes, no question. Nice girl, letting us go. Thank you!”

“Just don’t make me regret my decision.”

“No, no, never that! Disappearing now, yes!” They scampered off and disappeared into various dug out tunnels.

“Can we go now?” asked Elizabeth.

“They weren’t the great evil though, were they?” asked Matt.

“No, that’s further- you aren’t suggesting we... you are suggesting it?”

“We’re here, we should at least check it out.”

She looked over at Sam, who shrugged. “May as well.”

“Honestly. Boys. Come on then.”

The three continued down the passage awhile until they came to the collapsed section. By this time, Elizabeth had dismissed Strawberry Moon and brought her out again, so she had the correct number of arms.

“Want me to smash through it?” asked Sam.

Elizabeth shook her head. *He really does think only with his fists.* “And bring the whole place down on our heads?” She grabbed Matt’s hand. “Just grab on.”

The three passed through the rock and popped out the other side, continuing on. They came to another set of stairs and again had some trouble getting down, but they all made it safely in the end.

I didn’t realize these stair things were such a hazard for these beings, I thought. I suppose it could be fatigue.

The tunnel they were in gently sloped down and the group plodded along it for almost another half hour. Finally there was a light up ahead, and they perked up. Then they stopped and stared.

LEARNING THE WORLD

The tunnel opened up to a huge chamber with what amounted to a small underground city situated at the bottom. Glowing symbols covered the walls, enough to light up the whole place, and stairs led down to paths between the buildings. In the center area was a domed structure with a large statue at the top, which I zoomed in on. It looked like a half man, half fish sort of creature, which Sam was intently staring at. I swept my sensors over the area but didn't find any signs of life.

"Looks deserted," remarked Elizabeth. "Let's go so we can get out of here." She started down.

The three headed towards the center structure, becoming more bold as they realized no one was around. They entered it, and it seemed to be an ancient stadium, with stone seating carved around the edges. Sam looked pale and shaken.

"You okay?" asked Matt.

"I've been here before," he said, looking about. "Not in this lifetime, but in my previous one. Come on."

They went into the center of the place and found another statue of that weird man, which Sam looked up at in disgust. "Dagon," he spat.

"You know this guy?" asked Elizabeth.

"I should. I died here, I'm sure of it. This is the temple I destroyed as Sampson. That's the guy the Philistines worshiped."

"Seems pretty well kept up for a temple that was destroyed hundreds of years ago."

"I know. It's impossible for all this to be here. It was thousands of miles away, in a different time. It just can't."

Matt wondered over to the base of the thing. "Well, someone's been here. There's some kind of offering that's been made, and it's not that old."

"I am going to die here, again?" asked Sam, a haunted look on his face.

"That would be weird, but I guess logical," answered Elizabeth. "I mean, if you come back and have to be killed in the same way as before, it makes sense the place you were killed at would have to come back too."

"Usually it's more symbolic than literal," explained Matt. "According to Terathel, anyway. The exact place doesn't matter, just the events surrounding the person are similar."

"I have to get out of here," said Sam, turning and running back out the door.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Wow, he’s really shaken,” remarked Elizabeth, watching him go.

“Yeah. Let’s poke around a little more.”

They did, taking pictures of the place and poking into the seats, but coming back they reported nothing really of interest. They headed out and found Sam leaning against a nearby building.

“You okay?”

“This place just feels so wrong, I don’t know what to think.”

“Anthy says it’s the statue that’s the source of the evil feeling down there. We could just smash it to pieces, I guess?”

“It could be sealing something up,” ventured Matt.

“Nah, then the followers or whoever made that offering would have done it.”

“I don’t know what to do. Let’s look around some more.”

The three went into several buildings, which looked like they had been set up to be used, but thus far had not been. There were beds with new sheets, and empty dressers and closets. Also electronic equipment all plugged into these weird clay jars.

“This is so cool!” exclaimed Elizabeth, spinning one this way and that. “Are these things supernatural batteries? I’m so taking one- free power!” She tipped it and a liquid inside made a slight gurgling noise.

“But we don’t want anyone to know we were here, right?” said Matt.

“Aw, you’re no fun. But you’re right, I guess. I’ll be back for you,” she said, pointing to one. Matt rolled his eyes.

Another building was much the same, but had obviously been used recently. There was food in the small refrigerators plugged into the jars, and clothes in the dressers.

“This wasn’t set up in a weekend,” remarked Elizabeth. “Moving all this stuff down here, even with teleportation, would have taken a while.”

She sniffed some milk from a carton, then put it back in the refrigeration unit. “Still fresh, they’ve been here recently.”

“So where are they?” asked Sam. “This place gives me the creeps. It’s too quiet.”

“We better start getting back, it’s really late.” said Matt.

“Yeah, and we have school tomorrow,” remarked Elizabeth. “Doesn’t look like this place is going anywhere, we can check it out on a weekend or something.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

On the way out they took more pictures and discussed what to do.

“I know for a fact we can’t order any sort of explosives,” said Elizabeth. “Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“I really hope you’re joking,” said Matt, plodding up the hallway back to the main entrance. “But seriously, what are we going to do? I could get some of those cameras that hunters use, stick them around down there and see if they record anything.”

“I could leave one of my spirits down here to watch the place, but getting anything out of them might be tricky.”

“One of us needs to learn to call something that can teleport,” said Matt. “Then we can just pop back here at random and see if we catch anyone down here.”

“I just don’t understand how a statue can be evil. Unless that’s the real guy just turned to stone or something? And if these people want to sleep down here and give offerings to a piece of rock, who are we to stop them?”

“Oh, here we go,” said Sam. “It’s the ghouls all over again.”

“If you’re so afraid of this place, let’s not go there. You can’t be killed there if you aren’t there. Yes it’s a mystery how a whole ancient city you said you destroyed was rebuilt here, but so what? We got here by accident, following a ghoul that Sam accidentally saw.”

“It’s possible the Heavens have led us here,” said Matt. “It would explain the coincidences.”

“At the cost of one person’s life. Is that really how Heaven does things? There aren’t angels on Facebook? One couldn’t pop down to have a chat with us?”

“If it could save hundreds, I’m sure the loss of one man would be acceptable. He would probably have a guaranteed spot in Heaven, being used like that.”

“I suppose. Well, the camera thing sounds good to me for a start. It’s just such a pain getting here for the moment. We’ll have to see what we can do to shorten the trip, if we’re really going to see what’s going on down there.”

“I think we should,” remarked Matt.

“Like we didn’t already have enough on our plates...”

Loyalties

You put the family first, you know what I'm saying?

The next day Liz and Matt were pretty out of it, having gotten only about four hours of sleep the night before, and Sam was nowhere to be found. At lunch Matt called him to ask if he was all right, and he was, mostly.

“What do you mean, mostly?” asked Matt.

He listened.

“Yeah, that makes sense. Well, get some rest, okay?”

He hung up.

“What’s going on?” asked Elizabeth.

“He just says he didn’t get any sleep last night. That temple or whatever it was really spooked him, I guess.”

“Let’s just hope we don’t get attacked right now,” she remarked, looking around. “As our tank seems to be missing.”

“If he’s the tank, what does that make you?”

“The rogue, hiding in the shadows and hoping nothing spots me.”

“Ah.”

The rest of that week passed without incident and oddly enough without tutoring. For no reason I could see, Zephyr stopped training people, which made Matt and Elizabeth very nervous. Sam was back in school a few days later, still looking a bit off but at least present. Matt explained he had ordered the camera, which would have to be placed quite near any places of action to get any good pictures, and Elizabeth, with her photographic memory, sketched out some likely locations.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“But what about our tutoring sessions?” asked Elizabeth on Thursday at lunch. “I’m finally hyped about learning to call different spirits, and now I can just forget it, is that it?”

“What about them?” asked Sam. “Zephyr has always been on again, off again, right?”

“No, it’s different this time. There’s no reason for tutoring to stop, and the rumor is a lot of kids are getting one on one time with them. It feels wrong. Especially because in my old one on one time with Derren, it was ‘energy blast’ this and ‘changed your mind yet’ that.”

“What do you suggest we do about it?”

“Only one thing to do- spy on one of their meetings somehow. I don’t suppose either of you has a long running voice recorder lying around someplace, do you?”

They both shook their heads.

“Shoot. We could have easily planted it in a room somehow that they were using, and they would never know. Neither of my two spirit materializations can go invisible, so that’s out. What have you two got?”

Sam held up his fists, and Elizabeth rolled her eyes.

“I suppose an angel could watch from the Astral plane,” said Matt. “Most of them can step through to watch humanity if they want.”

“Great idea!”

“Except we don’t know exactly what powers they have,” counted Sam.

“What do you mean? They can’t see into the Astral, surely?”

“Can we really rule that out, though?”

“We take a chance either way. The only other thing I’ve got is Anthy. She could get real small, like as small as an ant, and slip under the door when they’re talking. I would just have to do it away from the school in case Elizabeth showed up instead. I have been working on the energy manipulation technique that can keep her bottled up. But I don’t know what my chances are, it’s pretty dangerous to try it.”

“It’s settled then, Liz will take care of it,” said Sam.

“Just like that?”

“You’re the one that wants to find out what they’re doing.”

“Fine. But I still say the angel plan is safer. They could know I was there easier than seeing into the Astral, I’m guessing.” *Plus, I always went along with whatever stupid thing you came up with to do. You might repay me a little with some support now.*

LEARNING THE WORLD

That afternoon Elizabeth started leaving to head away from school and put her plan into action.

Matt ran after her.

“What are you doing? Go away,” she said. “I’m going to find a place to call Anthy out, and if I get it wrong, you know who will show up instead.”

“That’s why I’m coming. In case you get into trouble.”

“She can’t hurt me,” said Elizabeth with a groan. “The only people in danger will be the ones who are around. We found that out the hard way, last time, remember? So goodbye.”

“Okay, I get the hint. See you soon.”

She left the building, then turned around. Matt was trying to hide behind a wall. She waved at him.

“Goodbye! Leaving! Bye-Bye! I CAN SEE YOU!”

Matt grumbled and went back inside. Elizabeth shook her head. “Honestly, that boy,” she said to herself.

*He’s like a little puppy, said Elizabeth. Can I come out now?
Who’s the puppy here? NO!*

Elizabeth walked back into the woods behind the school, and after a moment figured she was far enough to be safe. She called out Anthy, and struggled to hold Elizabeth back, succeeding this time.

She called upon the moon spirit and gave the power to Anthy, explaining she could walk through walls to find a classroom with a person and a student in it. Elizabeth herself would wait nearby, looking through her eyes. If Anthy couldn’t go any further in one direction, Elizabeth would move and repeat the process. Matt met her back at the front doors, and they went inside to see what they could find out.

It seemed like a good plan. Sadly, Elizabeth was still unschooled in exactly what abilities Zephyr members had.

As she watched through the ant sized Anthy’s eyes, flying through walls to look for whoever was next to be talked to, she got a shock. It was Sam himself, talking to Mordecai! He glanced around.

“We’re not alone. I think we need to take this conversation elsewhere,” said Mordecai, putting a hand on Sam.

LEARNING THE WORLD

They disappeared.

“Shoot!” said Elizabeth.

“What happened?” asked Matt, concerned.

“They were talking to Sam, and somehow Mordecai knew I was there. I really wish I had teachers that weren’t evil!”

“So he’s gone?”

“Yeah. And I didn’t get to hear a thing. I told you we should have gone with the angel plan!”

“We don’t know if that would have worked any better. Come on, we’ll head to the gym and wait for him to come back.”

Elizabeth grumbled to herself the whole way there.

Getting on the bus, Sam walked out of the building and joined them like nothing had happened.

“I’m glad to know you’re okay,” said Matt.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” asked Sam.

“You know why,” said Elizabeth. “Spill it! What did they talk to you about?”

“I can’t talk about it,” said Sam, looking away.

“Can’t, or won’t? What did they do to you?”

“They didn’t do anything to me.”

“That you remember,” counted Elizabeth. “So then you can tell us, it’s as simple as that.”

“It’s not simple, that’s the problem.”

“Seems simple enough to me. They cancel tutoring with no reason. They mysteriously talk to some people and not others. They choose you to talk to. We are your friends, they are not. They are evil, we have been told, we are not. Your loyalties should be clear.”

“I just can’t talk about it,” Sam said again, standing up and moving to a different seat.

“Great,” said Elizabeth, “he’s got the brain worms or something now, so it’s down to just us. We need to round up anyone that hasn’t been talked to and stick together. Maybe we can find out what the pattern is in their selection and get some idea of what they’re up to now.”

“Sounds like about the only thing we can do,” Matt replied.

The next day Elizabeth asked around to who had meetings with them and who didn’t. As she suspected, a pattern emerged. Those that she had seen exhibiting loyalty to Zephyr before this said “no” or “I don’t

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know what you're talking about," though clearly they did. Those, like her, that were not so loyal, or who had given up using their abilities said a genuine "no." This troubled her, I could see it.

Again, at the end of the day, Matt and Elizabeth went to the gym to do what practice they could, when Sam showed up.

"Are you still planning to go down to the temple to put the camera up?"

"Yeah, it arrived yesterday. Why? Not going?" asked Matt.

Sam seemed to struggle with himself a bit. "What if I told you who was down there, would you still need to go?"

"Oh, come on! It really is Zephyr down there? They worship some half fish statue?"

"When we teleported, that was where we went, so there's a good chance of that."

"That's just great," said Elizabeth, throwing up her hands. "And you didn't run screaming from Zephyr after that? You had to *think about it*? You remember how freaked out you were about that place? How could you even consider... what was it they talked to you about, anyway? Will you tell us now?"

"Mordecai told me they're about to leave, and are gathering up people they want to further train."

"As weapons, you mean."

"Maybe. He said it was to keep us safe."

"Safe. Uh huh. If you're a little fish, you don't go swimming in a shoal of piranhas to keep you safe. You try to find where the piranhas aren't."

"I'm just telling you what they said."

"What are we going to do about them, then?" asked Matt. "Tell spirit hunter society?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," said Sam. "I think they're a lot more powerful than they let on. If we tell the society, they'll just rush down there and get killed."

"Haven't I said this before? One of them was killed by a bunch of kids who had powers for like a month. They can't be all that good!"

"Maybe she didn't practice enough, or she was just younger. I don't know. I know they don't like you very much, Mordecai told me that right out."

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“Oh,” said Elizabeth mockingly. “Oh dear! How can this be? The evil group of cultists that are turning my classmates into their own private army don’t like me? Woe is me! What shall I do, now that I know that seeing through their evil plot to turn me into a weapon has made them dislike me!”

“Anyway,” said Matt. “Rosalita seems quite sensible. It seems to me we should at least give her the information on what we’ve learned, and allow her to pass it on or not. She knows her organization, and what they’re capable of. And I would rather hear “thanks for telling me, but there’s nothing we can do” now, then walk over a battlefield and hear “why didn’t you tell us earlier” at some time in the future.”

“I’m proud of this plan, and glad to be a part of it,” said Elizabeth.

“I guess,” said Sam.

She agreed to meet them around dinner time, and Matt suggested a local restaurant. She agreed, and the others went their separate ways for the moment.

Later, they met up and Rosalita, in her uniform, showed up.

The two explained the situation, and Rosalita leaned back, concerned.

“A temple to a half fish guy, huh? I’m worried these guys might be progenitors.”

“Who?”

“The first humans the All-Father made. He decided they were a mistake, and tried to wipe them out with the flood. Problem is, you try to wipe out a bunch of people who have the ability to learn every power, and you’re gonna have a bad time. It would fit with Socks not being able to turn into one, and about seers saying they were ancient.”

Okay, now that’s just ridiculous. If they’re talking about this All-Father, and it’s the same being that they believe brought their entire reality into being, why would that being need a bit of rain to wipe out one of its mistakes? Couldn’t it just will them dead, just as it willed them into being in the first place? Did it want some of them to survive? Then just spare those few. Were the humans just wrong about this? When am I going to find more answers rather than more questions?

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“So then how was that so called seer killed? Why couldn’t another person take that seer’s place when she was? If they can learn all powers, doesn’t that mean they can all do the exact same things?” asked Elizabeth.

“Everyone can learn to do just about anything,” replied Rosalita, “But we aren’t all cops.”

Sam looked over at Elizabeth, with an “I told you so” look.

“So what can we do? It seems they plan on stealing away most of our classmates?” asked Matt.

She rubbed her chin. “I’m really not sure. You don’t know much about what’s happening outside this area, do you?”

The three shook their heads.

“It’s not good. I can’t tell you exactly why, but in general... consider it a cold war between supernatural organizations. It seems something is manipulating these groups. Something big, because groups like the Foundation have been around a long time. So they should be immune to stuff like that. But it’s happening. Humans might start fighting other humans with powers, rather than being united against demons and such.”

“If you know you’re being manipulated, then just stop fighting. It can’t be that tough.”

She shook her head. “Events are spiraling out of control. It can’t be stopped any more than you stopping Zephyr from doing stuff.”

“I see. So this means no help is going to dramatically arrive? No soldiers sent to take them all out? Nothing?”

“I wish I could say they were, but...”

“I understand. I just hope you don’t look back on this day with regret, that you had the chance to do something before it got worse, and walked away, instead. The Zephyr problem is only going to get bigger, mark my words.”

“You’re probably right,” she said, softly.

That Monday when Elizabeth got to school, the seats were quite a bit emptier than they had been, and no one seemed to notice.

On a hunch, Elizabeth asked Anthy about that cavern they had visited, and was told “there is activity in the cavern.”

Also, no members of Zephyr were to be found.

Vanished

*“Luigi, didn’t I warn you not to play
around with those magic words?”*

--Harry Blackstone Jr.

That day, the group took stock of who was left, and what condition they were in. Everyone without powers acted as though everything was normal, and when questioned about specific people who were missing, claimed they never had existed.

All those who had gained demonic powers were missing. Across the other types of powers, Elizabeth estimated two thirds were gone. Of them, some remembered everything and were as confused as the three, while others seemed fuzzy on the whole thing. When pressed, their memories seemed to return. As she thought about it, Elizabeth seemed to recall a faint presence in her mind when walking into the school, but with Anthony and Elizabeth knocking around up there, she didn’t think too much of it.

Jared kept his memories of the events, but went on as usual, saying he was not going to start practicing even with Zephyr gone.

The halls of the school were quieter and everyone seemed to accept that as normal.

I was a bit awed. Oh, I now knew enough about the human brain that I might be able to modify someone’s memories. But I would have to do it one person at a time. The week passed uneventfully, with no news reports about mass disappearances. No hysteria that nearly a hundred kids were unaccounted for. That meant parents, teachers, siblings, an entire town had been manipulated into believing these kids never existed. Where was their stuff? What about pictures? Humans seemed obsessed

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with taking pictures of everything, even food they were about to eat. Were all these signs just gone now? Elizabeth didn't look much into it, probably figuring the kids were safe, for the moment, and stirring up that kind of trouble would only lead to a lot of heartbreak.

Instead over the next two weeks she focused on what she knew, as she now couldn't really learn anything new. She put her efforts into maximizing her ability with energy manipulation, and managed to pick up a skill she and Derren had been working towards before he left. Apparently she needed more skill in controlling her own energy, and finally managed to learn how to gather it from the environment when she used any.

It was a minor victory, but she felt she needed every edge for what she feared was coming. Sam was not using his powers during that time, and Matt was learning the same way he always had, from his "angel."

The only real event was the arrival of a new kid named Conner, who seemed a little more interested in the dance that gave the kids their powers than a normal kid would have, in my opinion. He also claimed to have traveled around a lot, saying he had lived in Chicago, Connecticut and Vermont, among other places. So he didn't have anything really permanent in his life. Matt, being the nice guy he was, tried to befriend Conner and told him what he could about the event. He also set up a little party with him and Elizabeth and Sam for the weekend. Elizabeth looked into the places he mentioned, and with Matt and Sam's help, found out there had been odd occurrences in all the places he stayed. There was no way for them to know, of course, if strange things just happened all over and anyplace they looked up might get them something, or if it was significant. All different things, but all violent and bizarre. Elizabeth was not looking forward to the weekend, as she wondered if this kid brought trouble with him, or their family went looking for it for some reason.

Some people chase storms, she reasoned. Why not supernatural chasers, too? But if he brought weird stuff with him...

Ah, the fateful weekend. It was a pity I had taken to stepping "right" while she slept, because night after night of just watching Elizabeth sleeping wasn't doing it for me. Even an immortal's patience has limits. So I missed something significant as time flew by me, and Elizabeth did too. I'm not sure what I would have done even if I had noticed, but maybe I

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could have left her a little clue; something at least. This was the weekend that Elizabeth got broken.

There had been, leading up to the Friday night that the event went down, news reports about animals being attacked and eaten in the nearby area. So it looked like she was right to be worried, and then it was reported that a person had been attacked in much the same way.

Friday evening, Matt called Elizabeth to tell her that he had sent Tabeume after whatever was doing this, and he had picked up a trail. She seemed to be gathering herself for an argument, like the one she used for the Ghoul, but then stopped.

He's going to go after it anyway, she thought. And of course Sam will want to just bust it up, no matter what it is. They need the voice of reason there.

"Okay, I'll come."

The group met up, using their various means, at Matt's house, and he reported that he talked to Rosalita earlier.

"She says she doesn't mind us scouting around, but that we should not engage if it looks like something we can't handle. Whatever this thing is, it's working its way up, and the way things were torn apart... Anyway, she doesn't have any leads so let's see what Tabeume has found."

He called out the dog like creature and they left the house, following the trail it had picked up earlier. It led them to a small park nearby, and it seemed they were not alone.

Elizabeth was high in the air, on her Thunderbird materialization, scouting from above. I was with her, and we both looked down to see a naked woman performing an act with a naked man.

This is where he's led us? thought Elizabeth.

Suddenly, the long black haired woman reached a hand back, and slammed it into the man, laughing.

That can't be good, I think.

"NO!" Elizabeth yells, banking Thunderbird. It shot lightning out at the figure, but it hardly got close.

Her skill with these constructs is too low, I thought as the bolt passed the woman by. She doesn't get enough practice with them to use them to their potential.

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The figure shot fire back, which Elizabeth dodged.

Matt called down Iris, who popped into existence. Sam started to charge the woman, but was seen and had fire shot at him too. I deflected it slightly, wondering why Sam seemed to be such a fire magnet. He got hit, but he was still up.

Meanwhile Elizabeth had gotten her weapon out and screamed down out of the sky, nicking the woman's leg and then looking down at her own.

"What the- Tell me that is not..."

She started concentrating.

"We don't have to fight, fellows, just hear me out," said the figure, turning into the woman they know as "Dlizabeth" and stepping off the picnic table where she had been "performing."

"It is you!" exclaimed Sam, jumping back. "How did-"

"It's a funny story-" Dlizabeth began, but then vanished again. Elizabeth landed, staring in horror at the corpse.

"It was me all along," she said, stunned. "They were right. Spirit hunter society was right. I should have been killed, then this never would have happened."

"What are you talking about? What's going on?" asked Matt, coming over to her. She dropped to her knees.

"Just get Rosalita here. She needs to be told about this."

"All right. Are you okay? Was that really Dlizabeth?"

"Just get her here, I'll explain later."

"Okay. You okay, Sam?"

"I'll live. What's going on with Liz?"

"Don't know. She's insisting that I call Rosalita, maybe you can talk to her."

Elizabeth looked over at Sam's wound as he walked over. "I guess that's my fault too."

"What is? What's going on? How did that woman disappear?"

"She got out, Sam. Despite my efforts, despite my never calling on Anthy because it was too dangerous, she got out somehow."

"How?"

"You think I know? Maybe if Zephyr, the evil ones, had given me even the slightest clue I could have worked it out. But now two people are dead. Or more, who knows how many she's killed tonight."

"So what are you going to do?"

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She turned away.

“Liz, what are you going to do?”

“What I should have done in the first place.”

“No, you can’t. Matt-” Matt got off the phone.

“She’ll be here shortly.”

“She’s going to give herself up!”

“Liz, no, that’s not the answer!”

“Isn’t it?” Tears were running down Liz’s face. “Two people are dead because of me, Matt. Because I didn’t work hard enough at controlling her? Because I used other shaman powers? I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters now. You’ve both been good friends to me, you know that? I hope you can explain things to my mother.”

“Don’t do this,” pleaded Sam. “We can still salvage the situation, I’m sure of it.”

Liz shook her head. “That’s what I’m doing. If she can now just come out of me whenever she wants, I’m too dangerous to be allowed to live any longer. Don’t worry, if I go to Heaven, you’ll see me again, I’m sure.”

“You can’t let her drive you to this,” added Matt. “You’re stronger than that!”

“I have no other way to punish her. Please, let my last moments have a bit of solemnness, okay?”

She turned away, staring at the man her inner demon had just murdered.

I was torn. It seemed there may be hope for this species yet, if a little girl like this was willing to give up her life to save others. But then a small doubt began to take hold: was she being noble or selfish? Was she really all out of hope, and felt this was a last resort to protect others? If so, she was being noble. But if she was taking the easy way out, knowing that a paradise awaited her and that Elizabeth would be destroyed, that was selfish. Little did I know events would continue to conspire against her.

Lights flashing, the vibrationally separate form of Rosalita drove up in her police car, and she stepped out. She walked over to the body.

Wait, why didn’t he just send her a picture and she could have teleported here? Sometimes the things these humans do just baffles me.

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“So why was it so important- oh dear.”

“So much for scouting, I guess,” said Matt, walking over to her. “There’s been a bit of an incident here.”

“That’s an understatement. I see you must have taken care of the thing that was doing this? Or did it get away?”

“A little of both...” said Matt, as Liz stood up.

“It was me,” she said, trying to dry her eyes. “Somehow my inner demon got out without me knowing. It did this. It’s inside me right now, and I’m prepared for what you have to do.”

“I... see.”

“We’ve been trying to talk her out of it.”

“So you know what I have to do?”

Liz mutely nodded.

“You don’t have to do this, we should explore every option!” protested Matt.

“You’ve had two months to explore options. Admittedly, you didn’t have the most trustworthy of teachers...”

“Exactly. Should she be blamed for something she didn’t, technically speaking, do?”

“But I did,” Liz said softly. “If I had never been born... if I had let the society kill me before instead of, in my arrogance, believing I had this under control... these two people would still be alive. Doesn’t that make this my fault, completely?”

“I refuse to accept that!”

Where’s Sam, Liz suddenly thought, looking around. She caught sight of him, having slipped behind some bushes to try and get around Rosalita.

“Don’t, Sam, you’ll just make it worse! Besides, you’re hurt!”

Nonetheless, Sam barreled out of the bushes towards Rosalita, swinging his fists. “You can’t do this!” he shouted. “It’s not right!”

Rosalita dodged him, and Sam stopped, clutching his burns.

“It seems Liz has come to the conclusion that it is right,” she said to him. “Our laws are clear. Her inner demon is a threat, I must end that threat.”

She drew her sword, and Liz bowed her head, accepting her fate. Matt tried to get between them. “Please, just a little more time!”

And Rosalita gasped, a phantom wound appearing on her chest. Blood spurted, and her form, sword and all, vanished.

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“NOOOOOOOO!!!” shouted Liz, reaching for where she was.

That wasn't me, in case you wanted to know, said Delizabeth, as Liz slumped to the ground once again.

“Why is this happening to me?”

A warning light at the side of my vision started flashing, and I looked over at Liz. My diagnostic routines registered a change in her brain chemistry. She was changing, right before my eyes, and I was powerless to stop it. Don't get me wrong, I could have, possibly I should have. But keeping someone from being burned alive by fire and tinkering with their brains to turn them into a person they weren't? Those were two very different things. I didn't notice at the time, but that night, when I saw her go through the trauma that changed her, is when I started thinking of her as “Liz” rather than “Elizabeth.” It just didn't seem right to regard her so formally, after I had felt the pain she was experiencing.

You have to be strong, I thought. *Don't let this world break you. If you can pull through this, my hope for this world will go up.*

“Are you okay?” asked Sam. “I was only trying to protect you. I... didn't think that would happen.”

Liz didn't reply. I wondered if she even knew he spoke, at that point.

There was silence in the park. Matt was looking around, probably wondering what else was going to happen that night.

“I'm so getting blamed for this,” he said.

Okay, maybe not.

“What are you talking about? I think Liz is hurt or something. She's not... here or whatever.”

“I was the last person to call her. When they find her dead, and find her car here with no evidence of her actually driving here, they'll come looking for me.”

“I don't think that's really what we need to be worrying about right at the moment.”

Yeah, really.

“Right, sorry. Liz, are you okay?” He went over to her and shook her a little bit.

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“I think she’s in shock or something.”

“Look, we’ll worry about her later. Right now we need to get her car back home, or something. Can you see if her address is in there someplace?”

“I don’t know how to drive! And anyway, I’m not sure if I leave finger prints or not.”

“Crap, you’re right. If they go dusting it, and they will... Here, hand me your phone.”

“I’m in spirit form, remember?” said Sam, pointing to his loincloth. “No pockets.”

“Then hand me Liz’s, I need to call Socks, he’s the only other grown up we know that deals with this kind of stuff.”

“So use yours!”

“I can’t. I don’t want to make another suspicious call right after the first one.”

“Fine. Sorry Liz.” He reaches into her coat and grabs her phone. She didn’t respond.

Someone’s good in a crisis, I thought. Is that angel of his helping or something? Does it protect him mentally as well?

A minute after making the call, a woman appeared out of nowhere, my sensors warning me to a localized spacial disturbance. She turned back into Socks and looked around.

Oh, now they think to use teleportation.

“Busy night?” he said.

“You have no idea!”

“Is Liz okay? She seems to be just sitting there.”

“She’s received quite a shock. Apparently it was her inner demon that somehow got out and was doing the killings recently. We tracked it here and I called Rosalita. Then somehow she died right in front of us.”

“How?”

“Fate,” croaked Liz.

“Liz? What do you mean by that?” asked Socks. He whispered to the others, “Maybe if we get her talking it’ll help.”

“Tools. We’re just tools. Rosalita was an ally. She had to die. To die she had to be vulnerable. To be vulnerable she had to be projecting. To be projecting she needed a reason. The reason was the deaths. The deaths

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were because of me. Follow the chain of probability from one to the next.” She looked over at Socks, who took a step back. “You’ll be next.” She went back to staring at the spot Rosalita was when she died.

“Yeah, she’s in shock.”

“Ya think?” asked Sam. “How do we help her?”

“I could find you a good psychologist?”

“I’m serious!”

“So am I! I don’t know if we can help her right now. Seriously, how did it look like she died?”

Liz jerked a little bit.

“Stabbed in the chest, maybe?”

“How long ago?”

“Couple of minutes? I called you almost immediately.”

“Then I might not be too late!” He transformed again, another woman, who closed her eyes for a moment. “No, it’s too late, they’re already gone. She’s alone.” Socks was back.

“Liz, I know it’s hard, but please try to tell me what happened. I don’t know how I can help you, but I certainly can’t if you don’t talk to me.”

“*It* said it came out on its own,” said Liz, not looking at him. “Which is just so great, isn’t it? All those times not using Anthy for fear it would get out, and now it can just pop out any time it wants.”

“Seriously?” asked Matt.

Liz seemed to listen. “Oh, a fluke! Of course, of course. Tell me, what do you have better to do than try every waking moment to find out how this so called fluke worked and replicating the experience?”

She paused again.

“Maybe you should have thought of that before you went skipping off to murder people.”

Pause.

“When you say that, all I hear is ‘I’m just not going to get caught next time.’”

Liz continued arguing with herself, and the others all edged away.

“Okay,” said Socks. “That’s kind of freaky.”

“Is that what I look like?” asked Matt.

“There’s really nothing you can do?” asked Sam.

“I’ll take her home and make sure she doesn’t hurt herself. Maybe after a good nights sleep she’ll feel better?” Even he didn’t sound convinced.

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“There’s nothing more we can do here, anyway,” said Matt. “Let’s just talk tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” said Sam, looking at Liz. “I hope she’s okay.”

Matt and Sam both took off, and Socks became the person he was when he first arrived, and teleported Liz back into her room.

She had fallen quiet again, and he put her to bed, curling up as a cat by her feet. He watched her with concerned eyes as she fitfully slept.

As did I. Some of her guilt lay with me, and I couldn’t even tell her I shared it.

I’m sorry, Liz. You are right, much of what has happened to you has strained credibility. These events, one leading to another, when logically other actions should have been taken... It’s almost as if some force was deliberately pushing you to your breaking point. But if it’s just “probability” as you once suggested, even I might be powerless to combat it.

In my scanning of Earth’s information network I had come across a quote I now pulled up, which seemed to fit the situation.

“The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded, sometimes destroyed.” Ernest Hemingway.

Assigning Blame

Make you so lonely, you could die.

“How are you feeling?” asked Socks, the next day when Liz woke up.

“Terrible.”

“I know. Would it help to talk?”

“I've killed. Matt said it wasn't me, but I know differently. I have to wonder though, to make a table, a tree must be killed. Is the sandpaper that smooths the wood at fault?”

“I would say no, of course not.”

“I was just the gun. It's not to blame. The bullets aren't to blame. I was the gun, it was the bullet. The hand on the trigger, that's where you need to look to assign blame.”

“I agree!”

“But telling myself that doesn't erase the face of that man who died right in front of me. It doesn't erase the shock on Rosalita's face when she died not ten steps from me. Ever since I got these powers it's been one death after another. Is that all they bring? Can I do no good with these powers at all?”

“You will, believe me. I'm sure of it. The world is just messed up right now, you'll see.”

“It just seems so futile. Stupid spirit hunter society. They knew about my condition- but did they ever once try to study it? Maybe the solution is staring us in the face, heck it could even be easy! But because they never bothered to try helping people like me, that solution is out of reach.”

“There's a more disturbing line of thinking. I'm not sure it's what you want to hear, but it should be said. There's every possibility they did investigate and came to the conclusion there is no means of dealing with it.”

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Liz shook her head. “No, I refuse to believe that. In two short months I’ve done things I never thought possible. To say there is no solution to this means you keep trying, not that you just give up.”

“I admit, powers can do a lot, but they can’t do everything.”

“No? I wonder. It might not have even mattered. I wasn’t even aware of it being out, so even if I could control it, this might still have happened.”

They were silent awhile.

“I wish I knew more. If you think you’ll be okay I’ll head back to the Watchers. Ask around, see if anyone there has made a study of this, or even better, gone through it themselves. That’s why you have to live, Liz. Live, and beat this thing. So you can help kids like you sometime in the future.”

Liz tried a weak smile. “I guess you’re right. Are you sure you want to hang around though? Everyone around me seems to die.”

He put a paw on her leg. “I won’t abandon you.”

“Thanks.”

With Socks gone, Liz pulled out her hidden journal and updated the entries, then basically spent the day moping about.

Busy with their own concerns, (or being too young to care) her family members didn’t even really notice.

I shook my head. Zephyr was proven to be evil, but Liz maintained Derren’s advice about not telling her mother was for the best? As I thought about it, this did make some sense. She was in danger, and any parent would want to try and protect their child from that. But how could a mother protect a child from a threat she couldn’t even see?

What will you do now? I wondered.

That evening Socks returned with bad news. He didn’t have any further advice from anyone he spoke to in his organization. Though he did admit that most people were out in the field at the moment, trying to keep the cold war cold.

By that time, Liz had sunk further into depression and hardly seemed to care. Socks paced nervously, probably wondering what else he personally could do for her.

Then there was a knock on her window.

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“Hey Matt,” she said, helping him climb in.

“Your phone was off. You okay? I canceled the party tonight, of course.”

“What do you think?”

“Yeah, um... didn’t reach Conner either, hope he doesn’t show up!” He gave a weak laugh but Liz just stared at him.

“Right. So, anyway, Tabeyume has agreed to try entering your dreams, see what we can do from the inside, so to speak.”

“Whatever.”

“Funny thing happened to me today, actually.”

Liz just stared at him.

“Uh, yeah, Some police officers showed up, of course. Expected that. Then the FBI came right after them. Wild huh? I’m famous!” He did jazz hands.

Again, no reaction. He looked over at Socks, who shook his head.

“Yeah, right. Okay, so, I guess we have to go to sleep then.”

“Fine,” answered Liz, laying down.

“She’s not really better...” whispered Matt to Socks.

“I went to the Watchers to see if I could dig up anything. No luck. I think she’s probably been like this all day.”

“But she’ll snap out of it, right?”

Socks shook his head. “I’m no psychologist. I think the bleak, lonely emptiness of her hopeless, futile predicament has really gotten to her. I don’t really know- maybe being forced to confront her inner demon will help? Or it could make it worse? I have no clue.”

“We have to try something.”

“I agree. You’ll have to sleep here, too.”

“Uh...” he colored.

“How about under the bed, in case her mom or someone walks in?”

“Yeah, good idea.”

After a while, all of them fell asleep, and I adjusted my perceptions to be 85% Liz’s neural net so I could follow along. I remembered Liz’s first time confronting her inner demon, and what her inner landscape looked like.

It looked a bit different now.

The forest was mostly gone. The bright, cheerful environment from before had been replaced by a blackened sky devoid of stars. Dead trees

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and brown leaves covering the ground dotted the landscape. If there was hope here, I couldn't see it.

"The anthill is gone," Liz remarked.

"I hope this isn't what it looks like normally," Matt said nervously, looking around.

"Nope," she replied simply. "We came all this way," she said to the ground. "I might as well let them talk. Come on out, Anthy."

An ant's head poked out of the ground, and a tunnel formed beside them.

"Come on," said Liz, resigned. "She'll lead us."

They went down into the tunnel, and the ants seemed to be more fearful than the last time I was here. They scurried past, heads down, as though they didn't want to hang around in the passageways. It wasn't long before Anthy showed them to a larger chamber, where Dizabeth lounged on a sort of slab made of packed together earth.

"There she is. Go to it," said Liz.

The others just looked between Liz and Dliz.

"Did you just come to admire me?" asked Dliz, getting up and stretching.

"Matt, maybe. I have no idea why he's really here," answered Liz.

"Not anymore. So what's the story?"

"Whatever do you mean, Matt?"

"You got out. You killed. You must have seen what it did above ground. Is that really what you wanted?"

"Yes, it was a bit nicer before, I admit. But what was I to do? I have needs, Matt. Needs she doesn't seem to want to admit to."

"Of course not," exploded Liz. "Killing? Taking strange men in parks? People eat off those tables you know."

"I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't have anything to do with me, now would you?"

"After you tried to kill Sam the very first minutes of your coming out? I should think not."

"You have to realize, that was highly situational. I have no interest in Sam now."

"Like I'm supposed to believe that?"

"It's the truth. Just like those two men I killed. When I got out I thought I could, out of respect for your wishes, limit myself to animals."

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“I can’t believe I’m listening to this.”

“When I got near them I couldn’t contain my need. They deserved it, Liz. I could smell the depravity on them, I knew what they had done. They were bad men.”

“And who gave you the right to kill them for it? It’s possible that tomorrow they may have realized their evil nature and worked to make it right. You took that choice away from them, and there’s nothing you can say that would make me believe you were doing the world a favor.”

“I admit, you weren’t supposed to show up right at the, ahem, climax of the situation. After that I would have just gone back into you, satisfied.”

“Right. Again, not really believing you.”

“You see what I’ve faced?” she asked Matt. “All because of one little situation with Sam. What was I supposed to do?”

“What was that situation with Sam, anyway?”

“I doubt it matters now. The demon there told me he and Zephyr were on the same side originally. They were afraid that Sampson was going to destroy their cult again, like he did before. There are only a few thousand of them left, and they’re worried he’s been sent back to finish the job the flood didn’t do.”

Wait, after all this time? Why now?

“What?” asked Liz, unbelieving. “If they were so afraid of him, why give us all powers? Without the event, Sam would never have known he was Sampson. Blissfully unaware he would have gone through life and died again, never even bothering them.”

“We don’t know it was them, giving us powers,” remarked Matt.

“They showed up awful darn quick,” shot back Liz. “No one else showed up to take credit for it- why expend all those resources Socks said it took to do all this, if you’re just going to ignore us later? Someone made that circle on the roof, remember? Or are you saying this is the manipulator again? That the cult just happened to be living in the area, and our school just happened to be picked because the soul of Sampson just happened to be there at the dance? Why not just rig his house and do it while he was asleep if someone wanted Sampson to have powers? Why drag the rest of us into it? Why kill holy people? Was getting Sam an accident? Why strengthen your enemies while you... do whatever? It’s all too coincidental, Matt. Something is driving it, but to what end or how... If they’re

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so worried about their cult being destroyed, *move!* Sam would never find them again, he's no seer! They're immortal, he's not. They wait the equivalent of a few days for them, and their problem is back in Heaven again. There was no need for all this!"

She fell silent again, her passion cooled.

"I don't know what to tell you," said Matt. "All I can do is add to your problems."

Liz stared at him.

"Like I was saying, the FBI showed up and started asking questions. They actually have a department that handles this stuff, can you believe it?"

"I don't have to believe it," Socks said, "because they don't."

"Then who were those guys? She gave me her card. Let me see..." He concentrated and a business card appeared in his hand. "Hey, dreaming is neat. Here."

He handed it over to Socks, who looked it over.

"Same old M.O. huh?" he said, clicking his tongue.

"Who?"

"They call themselves Orion's Huntsman. Normal people with just enough knowledge to be dangerous. They think only normal humans should be allowed to exist in the world."

"Great, now you've got yet another group after me," Liz said to Dliz.

"I'm going nuts in here, I'm surrounded by ants! What do you want from me? I've been straight with you, but you won't even give me a chance, will you?"

"You had a chance. You blew it. I don't care what that devil said or offered you. Your response should have been 'I don't know enough, but I am going to stand by my host right now' and then squashed him like a bug. Instead you sided with him, against me, and almost killed Sam."

"You're never going to see past that, are you? I can help you. So many times you've been in danger and you've refused to let me help. That puts me in danger too. You think I want that?"

"So that you can get out more and go around murdering more people? This time you even tried to blame it on me somehow, oh, the poor demon with her 'needs' and being 'cooped up.' Spare me."

"I've said my piece, it's up to you now," she said, laying back down.

"Let's go," said Liz, turning away.

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Matt woke up and got out from under the bed. Liz was sitting up, looking angrily at nothing.

“That didn’t exactly go as I expected,” he remarked.

“And how did you expect it to go, actually? That we would kiss and make up, everything forgiven?”

“I- I’m not sure, actually. I just hoped that I could help.”

“Well, you didn’t. So thanks for nothing.”

“You don’t mean that, it’s your guilt talking,” said Socks.

“Stay out-” She took a deep breath. “Just, please leave me alone.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later, Liz. I am sorry this all happened. I’m here for you, if you want to talk about it more.”

She grunted.

“Come on,” said Matt to Tabeyume, and they went out the window.

“What will you do now?” asked Socks quietly.

“I have to find some way to keep her in line. If that means letting it out every once in a while, it’s really Sam’s risk to take. It won’t hurt me, at least not directly. I’ll see what he says. If he’s willing to risk it, maybe I can work something out. I have no hold on her, that’s the trouble.”

“Maybe you’ll just have to trust her.”

“Ha! Trust has to come from her, especially after the problems she’s caused me.”

There was a knock on the window again. “Argh, now what?” She flung it open.

“Sorry to bother you again, but I thought of something else.”

“Oh?”

“Socks could erase your memories of that night. It would make you feel better, anyway.”

“I could, I suppose. The person I could become to do it isn’t great at it, though. And I’d have to be pretty careful, if I leave you any clues it’ll be like a scab. You’ll just pick at it until the block unravels, and then you’ll have to relive the experience. Plus anything you’ve decided to do about your inner demon would be suspect or changed, because this situation led to it...”

Liz shook her head. “Thanks Matt, but I won’t go back. This is who I am now. Taking that experience away changes my whole life, and like he said, even a perfect memory job will leave holes. Which makes what Zephyr did that much more scary, actually. But anyway, if I can just flip a switch in my brain to turn off my guilt, what kind of person would that

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make me, in the end? I won't live a lie. This happened for a reason. Maybe that reason strengthens this force that's manipulating us, but that doesn't mean I can't let it strengthen me. Thanks anyway."

"Okay. Goodnight."

And Matt slunk away into the night, unable to help his friend in any meaningful way.

Liz just tried to get back to sleep.

Putting Your Foot Down

She's mad as heck, and not going to take it anymore.

And so Sunday passed unremarkably, with Liz still moping about.
Odd that her mother doesn't notice her sudden change in behavior.

At the end of the day, Liz had seemed to make up her mind about something, and receded into her own inner space. I mentally followed. The landscape was still dark and barren, but a curious thing was sitting next to the ant hill, which it seemed was back, suddenly. She went over to it as though expecting something like this, and walked around it, looking it over and touching the plates to verify they were real.

In three neat stacks were 29 large, metal plates. They seemed to be made of iron, and were thick and heavy. Leaning against the anthill itself was a thick iron door, with serious bolts and hinges on the sides. She smiled as though this was perfect, then grabbed one of the plates and started sliding it behind her.

But this is her dream state, I wondered. She could just levitate them behind her, couldn't she?

Down into the ant hill she descended, passing worker ants that bowed to her and let her pass. She went down and down, dragging the plate behind her. She came to an empty room down a long hallway and dragged the plate inside. The room was a few paces to a side, and solid stone. Once there she stood it up against the back wall, by the corner, and a beam of light came out of her two fingers. Holding it up with one hand, she seemed to weld it in place with the beam of light, melting the stone behind it and fusing it with the metal. That done, she looked around. She

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seemed to be measuring in her head, and started pacing off the walls. It seemed the walls were exactly 3 sheets to a side, and Liz looked up and down, counting. She nodded to herself, and I realized the 29 plates would, when brought down here, exactly seal this room up. Once the door was put on, anyway.

She was going to imprison Dizabeth in her own mind.

She checked the time and decided she could put one more plate in place, so she trudged back up. Dizabeth stood in her way.

“Something had this place all stirred up, figured it was you. What’s going on?”

“Ah, my inner demon. Just doing some interior decorating. Come see.”

She swept past Dizabeth, forcing her to get out of the way, then followed with a shrug. Liz grabbed another plate.

“What are all these for?”

“You’ll see.”

After a moment of dragging the second plate down, Dizabeth asked the question I had been thinking about.

“You could just make that appear wherever you wanted down here,” she said. “Why are you doing it the hard way?”

“Because it has to be real,” explained Liz. “If I just wished it there I wouldn’t believe in it. I have to feel each of these going into place for this to work. At least, that’s what I believe. And because this is all about belief, this is what I’m going to do.”

“But what are you doing?” Dizabeth seemed a little apprehensive now.

“Oh, I think you’re starting to figure it out. Come with me and I’ll explain it once this is in place.”

So she followed, and again a plate was welded in place. That done she turned to Dizabeth and folded her arms.

“Take a good look around, because this might be your new home very soon.”

Dizabeth started to say something, but Liz cut her off.

“No, it’s not a negotiation. It’s how things are going to be. I’ll tell you the new way things work around here, and at the end the only words I want to hear from you are ‘I accept.’ Any other words and you don’t even get that chance. Clear?”

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Dlizabeth was silent.

“Good, you can learn. So here’s the deal- you saw the plates outside. I am going to carry each and every one of them down here, and build you a nice little box to live in. You did so kindly point out to me your fear of being locked in my soul until I die, after all. You know when that happens, you cease to exist.

“I admit I was afraid of you because I couldn’t control you, didn’t have any way to punish you should you go against what I wanted. This box is going to be that control. I had hoped just ignoring you would be enough, but I guess that’s not the case. Let it not be said I’m not flexible about things.

“Soon I’ll have your new home built- all but the door. You want to help me? You want to get out? Fine. Trust has to start someplace, and I guess that’s with me. So when I need you, I’ll let you out. Each time I bring you out is the last chance you get. Impress me. Make me believe I can trust you. The very next time you step out of line, this will be your new home. You are my tool. To be pointed, by me, at what I need done. In exchange I’ll let you stick around awhile afterwards. That is, if I’m impressed by your sincerity and performance. As long as you continue to impress, you go free, and the door stays off. You can walk around the hill, maybe help replant the forest outside. Whatever it is you do in here.

“But betray me even once, and I go get the door. Do you accept this arrangement?”

“I accept.”

“Excellent,” said Liz, clapping her hands together. “I knew you were reasonable! That’s all the time I have today, so I’ll be going. You can stick around here, if you want. Try to visualize what it’ll look like completed. Further imagine yourself here for the next 70 to 80 years. Then think long and hard about what you’re going to do. See you later.”

Liz broke out of the trance, and started getting ready for bed. Her spirits seemed a little lighter.

On Monday, Liz told Sam about her intention to call Dlizabeth out if needed, and if he was willing to take that risk.

“Ask me when the time comes,” was his only response.

Two days passed and it was now Wednesday, just before lunch. The kids had just sat down at the lunch table, with Lyn, Jared, Sam, Liz and Matt all at the same table. They weren’t really friends, but they had been

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brought together by one tragedy or another, so they at least understood where the others were coming from. They started eating, in silence, mostly. That's when something odd started happening.

I guess I shouldn't be surprised, I thought, as my armor warned me about an energy buildup in the local area. I was looking around for the cause when a lot of the students in the room started fading out, and I quickly stepped "left" to study the phenomenon. After a moment I decided to simply extend a thin filament of my armor around Liz's arm, and just allow myself to be dragged along. This worked.

The kids found themselves in some weird, otherworldly space, which seemed to overlap where they had been. Their table had turned into a large log, and the walls that were there had become ruined versions of themselves. The sky was dark, but the area was lit with a reddish glow from somewhere, and everyone was crying out with surprise.

Making a quick count, I realized it was only those with powers that had been dragged into this odd place, and watched as everyone tried to get their bearings. Conner, of all people, had been brought along, and clutched at his head, obviously in pain. He fell over, unconscious. Sam's body also slumped over as he became vibrationally separate and looked around for a threat.

He didn't have long to wait.

As the kids were getting up and making sure everyone was all right, a figure descended from the sky, and a bunch of people pointed up at it.

"Greetings," said Derek, his gaze sweeping the area. "I have brought you here because you have powers, unlike those common rabble I left behind. Welcome to my world. I will now give you a choice- to acknowledge me as your master and serve me in my world, or perish."

Overdramatic, much? thought Liz.

"I don't have any powers!" one kid shouted, "Put me back!"

Derek laughed. "Oh but you do, you can't fool my magic. So, what's it going to be?"

"We'll never acknowledge you. Come down here and fight like a man," shouted Sam.

"Ah, Sam, always so rude. But it's your new buddy Jared I'm interested in right now. I'll tell you what- I'll give you all a chance to think about your new situation while I deal with him. Then I'll come back to get your answer. How does that sound?"

"The answer will be the same- an hour, a day, a month from now.

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Get down here and fight!” Sam stepped in-between Jared and Derek.

“Ever the hero, eh?” He turned to the others. “Hold those that won’t swear to me. Or kill them. Whatever. Just see that they don’t make trouble. I’ll be back soon!”

He started doing something again, and Sam grabbed onto Jared as all three disappeared.

There was silence for a moment, then a general murmuring about what they were going to do.

“I’m not going to go against Derek,” said Lyn, frightened. “He almost killed me once before, so I think we should just do what he says.”

“Are you sure-” started Matt, but Liz stalked over to her, a grimace on her face.

“What?” said Lyn, taking a step back.

Liz hauled back with a fist and slugged her in the face, causing her to cry out and fall over. Everyone was shocked, staring at them.

She really has changed, I thought sadly. Elizabeth would never have done that. I guess I’ll have to get used to “Liz” having a different attitude. Still, Lyn did roll over a bit easily there. It’ll be interesting to see if any now side with her.

“And the same goes to anyone else who sides with him,” Liz shouted, looking over at the others. “No more running. No more fear. We take him out together, and end this. Who’s with me?”

There was a moment of shocked silence, and Lyn was on the ground, rubbing her face. “I can’t believe she hit me,” she said, shocked.

“Are you crazy?” one boy said. “You saw what he could do. Look around! This weird world he took us to, we can’t fight that. We’d be crazy to go against him.”

“Yeah,” said another. “We’ll just do what he says, he’ll let us go eventually, right?”

“We should probably grab them, make sure they don’t cause trouble,” said another.

What’s that saying about mob rule? I thought.

The group took a tentative step towards Liz and Matt.

Matt had not been idle while this was going on, he was quietly praying, and the sphinx he had called recently popped into being.

“Ocket, stare-down!” he said, pointing to the group of kids.

“You got it,” said Ocket, and stared in their general direction. They froze.

“Let’s go,” said Matt, taking a step towards the sphinx. “We need to get Sam’s body safe and figure out what to do!”

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“Look, in five words, what’s going on?”

“Evil summoner. We're killing him,” said Liz. *Is a contraction considered one word or two?*

“Oh,” said Ocket. “Climb on then.”

Liz shrugged and jumped on her back, while Matt struggled to do so. Sam and Conner were scooped up.

“Argh, just go, get him to safety. I’ll be fine,” said Matt, turning to run.

“You're the boss,” said Ocket, and wings appeared on her back. She gave a leap and took to the air.

With the sphinx gone, the students reanimated and started chasing Matt, but I followed Liz into the air.

From above we could see that what looked like the entire school was brought along. Students in classrooms, or what were classrooms, were milling about, confused. The landscape was dotted with bizarre structures and shapes, the most notable the castle like building not far from where they were.

“So now what?” asked Ocket.

“Find someplace to stash his body and go back for Matt, I guess. You can swoop down and grab him, right?”

“I suppose. Where do you think?”

They looked around. Where the forest behind the school was, a strange field of pointy objects existed instead. Liz pointed in that direction.

“They won’t bother to head all the way over there,” she said. “Go a little ways in and we’ll stash them there.”

“Looks as good as any place else.”

Once their bodies were safely “hidden” the two headed back to Matt, who was now in a standoff with the students. Ocket swooped down and grabbed him under the arms, then took off again before they could do anything.

“Thanks,” said Matt. “Anything interesting happen?”

“The other two should be safe for the moment,” replied Ocket. “We did see a castle looking thing over there. It seems promising.”

“It’s okay with me.”

They flew there, and in the distance, two winged creatures started rising up to meet them.

“Hang on,” said Ocket, flying higher. The two creatures followed, and when they were nearly as high as Ocket, she stared at them. They went

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rigid with fear, and dropped like stones. Liz looked over the side as they smashed into the ground and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

“That worked,” she remarked. “How do you want to get into the ‘castle’ anyway? The front gate, or through the walls?”

“Given how long he had to plan all this, it’s probably trapped either way,” said Matt. “But we should probably have the ability to phase anyway, in case we fall into a trap.”

“It’s either that or throwing lightning. That’s all I can offer you.”

“Phasing it is.”

“You got it.”

She started chanting, and a moment later my sensors told me she had lost a bit of energy. “You’ve got it for ten minutes,” she said. “If we need longer than that, I’ll just have to redo it.”

“I’ll head for the front gate, then,” said Ocket, diving. She pulled up in front of the castle, which was complete with lava moat and drawbridge.

“Homey,” said Liz, sliding off. “Let’s get this over with.”

The three walked inside, and found themselves in a long hallway. Above them came the sound of laughter.

“You guys hear that?” asked Matt.

Suddenly, from above, a small, hunched creature dropped down and started running towards them. Ocket stared at it, and it went rigid.

“Seriously?” said Liz. “That’s the best you can do, Derek?”

Then four more fell directly on Ocket, who started snarling and swiping at them. Matt began what I recognized as his “banishing” ritual, and Liz started copying him. I felt power come out of them both, but the tiny creatures didn’t go anywhere.

“Tried to get them all,” remarked Matt. “Guess that was a mistake.”

Yes, you know Liz would have gotten whatever ones you didn’t, so half would have sufficed.

It didn’t matter, as they were swiftly dispatched by Ocket, who only needed one swipe of a paw to bring one down.

“Wow,” said Liz, impressed.

“You’re amazing,” said Matt. “I’m glad you’re along for this!”

“Please, you are too kind.”

“Guess I’ll whistle up some help as well, not that I think you’ll need it,” Liz hastened to add. “Strawberry Moon- Materialize!”

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And then they were four.

The castle was seemingly abandoned, at least the rooms held no living things, and the group searched them quickly before finding a stairway up. There was a pounding and yelling coming from that direction.

They nodded to each other and started up.

At the landing above there were four large, black hounds, who perked up as they approached.

“These guys again? He just doesn’t learn,” remarked Liz.

Again, Ocket launched herself into the fray, with Strawberry Moon right behind her. Matt banished one of them, and Liz emulated it, getting another. By that time, Ocket had taken a bit of damage, but nothing that seemed serious. One of them yelped, getting smashed with a paw, and didn’t get back up again. Matt again failed to banish the last one, but Ocket ripped it apart and it vanished. She looked over at the one lying there and raised a paw to finish it off.

“Wait!” cried Liz, rushing forward.

“Why should I spare this filthy demon?” asked Ocket.

“We’re not sparing anything. I want the thing’s energy. You must have used some after all that, and I know banishing takes energy from Matt. I’ll split what he has between the two of you, I’m still fine.”

“That won’t be necessary. I would not taint myself with anything that came out of this creature.”

“Suit yourself. Matt?”

“I’ll take it.”

Liz touched the demon and Matt, and concentrated for a moment. My sensors showed energy flowing from the dog into him, then into her. It vanished.

“You see? It’s part of me now. I make the same offer, if you want some of my energy, I’m happy to share. You’re doing the bulk of the work here, after all.”

“I do appreciate the offer, but I will be fine.”

“Suit yourself. Ready?” She gestured to the door.

“Ready,” said Ocket, who shoved it open and sprang inside.

The chamber inside was large, seeming more like a cave than a room inside a castle, and two ice creatures stood guard on the other side of the door. They turned.

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Across the room, hooked up to some bizarre looking restraint device, was Jared. Derek stood gloating in front of him. Across from them, behind some sort of energy barrier was Sam, pounding on it and trying to get out. Halfway between Sam and the others was a devil, idly looking about. On a table next to him was a large gem. The devil waved to them with a smile.

“Took you guys long enough to get here,” Jared said weakly. “Thanks for coming to rescue me, but this really was my mess, so it’s up to me to clean it up.” Energy started crackling around him, and the metal contraption holding him started to glow.

“What are you doing?” demanded Derek. “Stop it! I command-”

He didn’t get to finish, as the mechanism, and him, exploded outward. Derek was thrown back, staggered. Where the machinery was, a glowing ball of energy was now hovering.

“Moon, get Sam out of there,” commanded Liz, and the construct nodded. She started flying towards the cage.

Derek got up, and I noticed his face seemed to be cracked, as though there was a mask over his face that had been damaged. He cast a spell, and Liz emulated it, both of them getting an odd energy field around themselves. Liz shrugged, obviously she didn’t know what it was.

Ocket, leaping for one of the ice creatures, dodged a beam of ice coming towards him from the other creature. Liz smiled and put up a hand, and an identical ice beam shot from her, hitting Derek and again knocking him over.

Matt once again started banishing, and Liz was trying to watch every direction at once to emulate anything that was done that seemed useful. Ocket took a hit, but shattered one of the ice creatures.

The other, seeing that Liz had done what it had done, apparently decided she was the larger threat and shot ice energy at her, but it was deflected by a barrier that Liz got up.

Ocket smashed that one, then gave a mighty push with her wings which had appeared and sailed over to Derek. She went to hit him in the body, but there was a flash and she staggered back.

What in the world was that?

“Not so tough, are you?” sneered Derek, standing up and casting again. Ice started forming around Ocket, but she smashed out of it. “I’ll get you this time!” Ocket yelled, again slamming a paw into Derek, but again it was somehow reflected and Ocket vanished.

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“Crap!” yelled Matt, and started banishing again.

“Are you just going to stand there?” shouted Derek to the demon.

“That’s the plan,” he said, grinning back.

Derek snarled something at him, then grabbed what looked like a human bone out of a pocket and tossed it on the ground. He started chanting. In seconds, two more of those black dogs appeared.

“Kill them!” Derek shouted, and the dog’s eyes glowed red. Liz’s eyes also glowed red, and she directed her gaze at Derek, who shrank back.

By this point, Moon had figured out she needed to go under the barrier, and had grabbed Sam to fly him out of there through the stone floor.

Derek started casting a spell again, as did Liz, and four more ice warriors appeared, two near him and two near Liz and Matt. The dogs rushed the two but Matt got off a quick banishing and they disappeared, inches from hitting.

“Oh, come on!” yelled Derek in frustration, then “Oh crap!” as Moon swooped under the barrier and got Sam free. Sam smiled at him. He hastily started casting a spell again.

“Payback time.”

He leaped at Derek, who tried to scramble away, but Sam’s fist connected with his leg, shattering it. His concentration broken, the spell, obviously some sort of fire based energy, smashed into him instead of being projected outward, and with a cry of despair, Derek burned away.

The ice warriors vanished as well.

The four turned to the devil, who was picking up the gem from the table. He held out a hand.

“I don’t know how he did it, but that guy that came to see us really was on the level! Guess I’ll have to follow him after all...” he said thoughtfully. “See you.”

He vanished, and the world started poking back through the walls of the bizarre cave. Everyone looked around, eyes coming to rest on Jared, who was now transparent and fading away.

“How am I still here?” he asked, holding up a hand. He looked right through it.

“Is there nothing we can do?” Matt asked over his shoulder, and listened to the reply.

“I’ll probably fade away with this weird place,” said Jared, as the others gathered around him. “So I don’t have long. Figure out what Zephyr is up to, okay? And give them one from me.”

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“Will do!” said Sam, punching his hand.

“It’s a promise,” said Liz sadly. “I’m sorry we weren’t able to save you.”

“Ah, like I said. If I hadn’t been so mean to him, this never would have happened. This is just the price I have to pay, I guess. Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll see each other again... someday. Bye.”

Liz just seemed numb, no tears fell from her this time as the world came back into focus and the group found themselves standing in a backyard.

Moon floated over to Liz, who thanked her, and dismissed her with a wave. She vanished.

“Now we can go have a little talk with Conner,” she said darkly. “And see what part he has to play in all this.”

Disease

In sickness, and in health.

It wasn't quite as easy as Liz had hoped, in the first place she had to work out where she had left Sam's body. Not having any special connection to it seemed quite risky, in my opinion, but this planet didn't have the technology to slap a small tag on something and find it anywhere. Maybe they would later though... A few tense minutes later, however, and Sam was no longer vibrationally separate from the world. The three gazed down at Connor.

"Wake up!" she said, slapping him in the face. He didn't stir. "Well, if he is faking it, he's doing a bang up job. You're the strong one, Sam, you get elected to carry him back."

"You didn't have to slap the guy," Sam said, getting Connor on his back.

"Didn't have to punch Carolyn either, but I'm finally coming to appreciate what you see in it."

"Now we're all in trouble," he muttered.

Trudging back to the school, the three were passed by several police cars and ambulances, and more sirens could be heard in the distance.

"Gee, I guess people freaked out when a bunch of students disappeared and then reappeared out of nowhere," remarked Liz. "When really it's starting to become the norm around here."

Once back, teachers were running around taking an attendance of sorts, making sure everyone was accounted for. No one really questioned their showing up again by walking into the school or the unconscious Conner so

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Liz went back to the cafeteria to collect her lunch things. Those that had gone into the odd space were staying a little further away from her when she walked by. She glared at them. “Sellouts,” she muttered.

It took about an hour for everything to get calmed down and for people to notice Jared was missing. Announcements were made that anyone seeing him or who had any information about it should tell a teacher. Liz just sighed. Connor was up and about, so Matt went over to talk to him. Liz was going to follow, but then gave a shrug.

What’s the use? Anyway, I’m probably not the best person to deal with him at the moment, she thought.

At least you realize that, was mine.

At the end of the day Matt pointed Connor out leaving with a familiar face- one of the fake FBI agents he had seen earlier!

“Surprise, surprise,” said Liz. “Guess who’s going to be in trouble when they find out he has powers,” she said darkly.

“I don’t think he does though, yet,” said Matt.

“No? Whatever brought him with us seemed to think so. And his whole fainting routine also seems pretty suspicious to me. So you’ll forgive me if I stay in the ‘he has powers’ camp over here.”

“He said something weird was going on with my eyes when I asked him earlier, so he’s starting to see what we can.”

“Great, just what we need. If he can hide it and then starts hunting people like us, even spirit hunters will lose their greatest advantage.”

“Then I guess we’ll just have to make sure they don’t start hunting us.”

“Go kill them, you mean? Probably for the best.”

“No!” Matt said, shocked. “I mean tell them the truth. Make them see what they’re doing is wrong.”

“Oh. Well, when that doesn’t work out, let me know, and I’ll have Elizabeth take care of things for you.”

My pleasure, said a voice inside her.

At lunch the next day, Conner admitted his mother was a Huntsman, part of a loose organization of normal people with a vendetta against those with powers.

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“Some sort of creature killed my dad, that’s how we got into the business,” he explained. “So I want revenge.”

“On the entire supernatural world?” asked Liz. “Good luck with that.”

“They’ve been doing well so far.”

“What do you mean? It still seems to be here, as far as I can tell.”

“Obviously we can’t handle everything...”

“Here’s a piece of advice. Leave. Now. Go back the way you came and don’t come back. Because there’s no way you can handle what’s going on around here. Those with powers can hardly handle it, and you’re going to be little more than a speed bump.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Just friendly advice. Jared had powers, and he’s not coming back. What do you think you guys are going to do if you’re hunting down some creature you can’t even see, and can’t conveniently murder in her bed?”

“Look, just tell me what’s going on. Is that so much to ask?”

“You do it, Matt. I have nothing more to say to him.”

So Matt explained about the dance, and how many people got powers. He talked about Zephyr, and who they seemed to be. Then he got to Rosalita.

“Yeah, soul jumpers put on a good show about being all upstanding or whatever, but you can bet she was just as bad as the rest. I’m glad there’s one less of them in the world,” said Conner

“She was a police officer!”

“All the better to do evil and get away with it.”

“Seriously?”

“Look, we know a lot about the supernatural world. You’ve admitted you’ve only had powers like two months. So how do you know?”

“Uh, angels, for one? Like I have one with me right now, same as always, who gives me information?”

“If it’s even an angel. So where is it, I don’t see it.”

Liz tuned out again. *There’s no way he’s getting through to Conner. Why even bother trying?* Matt tried various arguments, but it didn’t seem like he was getting anywhere.

“I want to talk to them,” said Matt. “Your mother and brother. Maybe I can convince you if I show you some real angels.”

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“Are you crazy?” asked Sam.

“I’m with Sam on this one, Matt,” said Liz. “My advice is to just let them either get board and leave or get killed. Either way our problems with them would be over.”

“I wouldn’t put it like that,” said Sam. “But I agree we should probably have as little to do with them as possible.”

“But we’re on the same side,” protested Matt. “They just need a little more real information.”

“We are not on the same side, Matt. They killed Rosalita, remember? One of the good guys? That makes them the bad guys.”

“They thought they were doing good.”

“And that makes their actions excusable? Do I have to Godwin this conversation?”

“Power corrupts,” broke in Conner. “No matter how well intentioned they start, they’ll all go bad in the end.”

“Yeah, I recall saying that very thing to these guys,” said Elizabeth, smugly. “Problem is, it doesn’t work in your case. What’s the difference between a person who kills with a gun and one that kills with an energy beam? The thing they’re killing is just as dead. So I would say the same to you; your huntsman buddies have power, and they’re using it to kill good guys. How is that not corrupted?”

“It’s different.”

“Not from this side of the table.”

The next few days were quiet, with Liz working a little more on her prison and staying away from Connor. She found that she couldn’t always lift one of the plates to carry it down, and puzzled over that.

It must be psychological, there’s no actual mass or weight inside here. Weird. Oh well, when I can, I will. As long as I’m seen working on it every once in a while, Elizabeth should stay in line. I hope.

Liz tells Matt she is in no mood to attend his “makeup party” that weekend, especially if Conner is going to be there. So she spent the weekend doing homework and writing in her journal.

She learned later that another spirit hunter, by the name of Uther, stopped by during the party to check up on Rosalita. Matt was given Uther’s number and told to call if anything came up. Apparently the meeting hall the group had been taken to had been destroyed a few days earlier, and that was why it had taken someone so long to check up on the situation in this area.

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It looked like Elizabeth felt a bit smug about that happening. Matt also mentioned that Socks had checked in, and when he learned there were Huntsman around, went back to report that.

Doesn't he have Telepathy or something? Or a phone? thought Liz. Why is he always running off? I suppose our situation isn't his responsibility. But isn't their group supposed to deal with stuff exactly like we're dealing with now? I don't get it.

The next week passed uneventfully until Wednesday, and Elizabeth wrote a 74 on her calendar. She was keeping track of the days since they had gotten powers, just in case it somehow became relevant later. She glanced over at her phone-

1 Missed Call

That's funny, who would have called me after I went to bed? She noticed it was Sam, around 11:00 PM the night before. I should probably get back to him.

Suddenly it beeped, and a new text message showed up.

Just talked to Sam. He called last night. Says he thinks he's dying. I'll head over there and see what's up.

That's taken care of then, thought Liz, no longer caring.

At school, she spotted Matt riding Tabeume and heading someplace he could get off, and went to meet him.

"So what's the story?" she asked.

"He does seem sick. Apparently some guy showed up last night looking for Socks. He touched Sam and gave him a written note to pass on, and now he's feeling like crap and whining about dying."

"Can he even die? I thought as Sampson he had to die fulfilling his destiny."

Matt shrugged.

"Right. So did you call Socks?"

"He actually came back on his own, his timing is just a little off. Couldn't remember who the guy was at first, apparently he's pissed off a lot of evil people working for the Watchers."

"I couldn't imagine."

"Yeah. Anyway, he's some sort of unholy chosen, Hell's answer to holy chosen. Goes by the name of Adam, I guess. As holy chosen can heal disease, these unholy chosen can cause it. So I guess Sam is in pretty bad

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shape, because the disease is supernatural in nature. He won't be able to fight it off, himself. The note said to meet him at some warehouse at 10:00 tonight. So I figure we'll head there and beat him up."

"Wait, is a holy chosen the *only* cure? Because there's a distinct lack of them around here. If he can only cause disease how is beating him up going to help? He couldn't cure Sam even if he wanted to."

"Oh, that's a good point. I didn't think of that."

Liz rolled her eyes. "It's a good thing I'm around to ask these probing questions, then. You want to stake the place out or something?"

"Socks says we better play it straight for now, give Sam the most chance of being cured. He's also sent word to the Watchers that we need one, so maybe they'll come through before it even becomes an issue."

"Okay, whatever. Just to review: we have to beat this guy up while being careful not to accidentally kill them. Or letting him touch us, of course. Then somehow persuade him to revoke the disease? I'm sure that'll go well."

"What else can we do?"

"Not much, I guess. Okay, I'll meet you over there like half an hour early."

"Okay."

The two got through the rest of the school day and started preparing at home. Around 9:00, Elizabeth was surprised to see Matt, Sam and Socks appear in her back yard.

She snuck out to meet them.

"Figure we would just come get you, that was easier than you trying to fly yourself over there."

"Works for me. Sam, you look terrible."

"Hello to you too," Sam croaked. I had to admit, he did look terrible. It seemed he was wasting away, and checking his vitals I didn't give him long to live.

"I don't want to be too early, but I wanted to catch you before you left," said Socks. "We'll head there after a bit."

"I'll need to do some prep work anyway," said Liz. "I was going to do this on the way over, but since you're here, I'll do it now. Sam I take it isn't going to be doing any fighting?"

"Not unless I need to fall on somebody."

"Yeah, so you get nothing."

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Elizabeth started chanting, and gave Matt and herself the help of the spirit of the Moon and the spirit of the Thunderbird. “So remember, you can shoot electricity out of your hands and go insubstantial by willing it. You should also be able to dodge better, as I figure not getting touched is the watchword of the evening.”

“What about me?” asked Socks.

Liz looked at him. “Seriously? The guy with years and years of combat experience, who can turn into anyone he’s ever seen and probably has just about every power at his disposal, needs the help of a 14 year old that’s had powers less than three months?”

“I was only joking.”

“Well don’t.”

“Sorry.”

Having arrived at the scene, I saw the building was some sort of abandoned textile mill or something, and it’s pretty dark along the street.

Liz called out “Strawberry Moon, materialize!” and her spirit construct appeared. “So what’s the plan? Rush in the front, take him by surprise?”

“By surprise, yes, but you guys should probably head in the back way,” said Socks. “If he plays it straight and takes the disease from Sam in exchange for a chance to take me out, fine. Stay out of it and get clear when you can. If it goes south you can attack from the rear.”

“I’ll take the rear, you take the far side,” said Liz to Matt, pointing.

“Good luck,” said Matt.

Socks turned into Sam’s spirit form and helped Sam to the front door. Liz and Matt went to their respective sides and walked through the walls into the building. I followed. Inside the building there were a suspicious number of crates lying around, with sawdust and shredded paper strewn about the floor. Making her way silently forward, Liz came to the central area and saw a figure sitting inside a symbol drawn on the floor. He was muttering something which Liz couldn’t make out. The figure was hidden by a long cloak, and as she was directly behind the figure she couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman.

She did see the figure look up and stop chanting, Socks must have been pounding on the door on the far side. The figure got up and went to the door, throwing it open.

Two Sams, one half carrying the other, stepped inside. The figure backed off. Socks-Sam set Sam-Sam down and took a step away from him.

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“I’m here. I’ve kept my word and I’ll do what you ask if you cure this boy of his affliction.”

“It’s not going to be that simple,” said the figure, who Liz heard was male. “Only fair to make things as difficult as possible for you, wouldn’t you say? Best to take the strongest piece off the board at the start, if you can.”

“If there’s something you’re going to do, then do it to me. Don’t drag others into it.”

“My master wishes him destroyed. You think I wouldn’t take the opportunity to earn his gratitude?”

“Are you letting him go or not?”

I saw Liz tense up.

“I think the answer to that is pretty obvious. Arise, my army!”

The man threw his hands up dramatically and the crates started groaning and opening. From each one a humanoid figure started to climb out, and Liz looked at the nearest one in disgust.

Zombies? she thought. *Sam can’t defend himself, better leave the attacking to Moon and Matt, while I protect him!* She took off running across the floor, not bothering to go around anything as she was still intangible. I noticed Matt getting into a better position, and Socks turned into a weird looking lizard creature wreathed in fire.

“You think that will help you?” The man took a small doll from a pocket and held it up. It was in the shape of a cat with two tails. “May every moment you spend in a form that is not your own wither your very soul,” he said, holding it up.

That’s when Strawberry Moon flew up behind him and stabbed him in the leg with her hair. He seemed surprised and turned to look at her. Socks shot fire at him, also hitting the leg, and he went down on one knee. He grabbed it and yelled in pain. Matt took that opportunity to shoot lightning at his head, which caused him further pain. He grabbed at Moon, touching her arm, but nothing happened. He looked at her, confused.

Passing Socks, Liz noticed a kind of steam coming off him, and it looked like he was also in pain. She skidded to a halt next to Sam and threw up a barrier. Just in time, as the zombies by this time had kicked free of their crates and were shuffling behind her.

Adam had seen where the lightning came from, and ran over there, reaching him just as Matt called upon Iris who appeared with a squawk and looked around. Adam managed to get around him and reached for Matt, but his angel batted the attack away with his mace.

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Moon had been following him, trying to get a clear shot, and missed, trying not to hit Iris.

Back with Liz, several “zombies” were trying to get through her barrier and were being damaged by it. Next to her, Socks was backing off. “I can’t deal with him like this,” he shouted to her.

Super, thought Liz. She turned her attention inwards. Hey, you want to cut loose for a bit?

I thought you would never ask, came the reply.

“Then go!” she shouted, and energy shot from her body, coalescing into an odd looking fox/ant hybrid. It laughed and started shooting streams of fire into the 3 dozen zombies shuffling about the place.

Meanwhile, Adam had squeezed the doll, and Socks went down with a cry, his back legs broken. Iris then managed to grab the thing from his hand, and Matt kicked him between the legs. He went down, whimpering.

The most amazing powers I’ve ever seen in my travels, and it still comes down to that? There’s no hope for these people after all, is there.

Moon floated over to him and regarded his prone form. She readied her hair and formed it into a blade. She started aiming for the head, but Liz looked over and she changed the position of her attack. Slicing down she cut his leg off instead, and he screamed and passed out.

Whoops, even that might have been a little too much. Guess I better make sure he doesn’t die before we can get some answers out of him. Ugh, this sucks!

Moon started wrapping the wound up with her hair, and the bleeding stopped for the most part. Everyone watched as Elizabeth gleefully tore the “zombies” to pieces, finishing them all off with hardly any trouble.

“How was that?” she asked Liz, who made sure she was between her and Sam, and stopped maintaining the barrier.

“Thus far an excellent demonstration of your sincerity,” Liz answered.

“So I can stay out awhile?”

“For the moment, yes. I doubt he’s faking it, but he could still be dangerous.”

“I could eat him for you!”

“Later, once Sam is okay.”

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“Promise?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“I’ll look forward to it then.”

She went over and grabbed the part of his leg that had been cut off and started tearing into it with her teeth.

“Does she have to do that?” asked Matt, looking pale.

“Leave her alone, it’s better than the last time she came out. At least she’s doing as I ask.”

“I’m right here you know.”

“Socks!” Liz seemed to remember him. He was laying on his side by the door. Elizabeth shrugged and went back to eating the leg. “Are you—oh, no, you aren’t, are you? Can you heal yourself?”

“Being in any other form is going to be a bit unpleasant at the moment,” he answered. “I’m afraid I’ve been cursed, with that doll thing as the focus.”

“I can help with your legs, at least,” said Iris, flying over to him. She looked down at him, and then started crying, her tears falling on his legs and healing them up.

“That’s one problem down, what do we do with this guy? Iris isn’t going to be able to heal him up, and we have no other healing powers.”

“I have no idea,” answered Matt.

“Thanks for protecting me, by the way,” Sam weakly said.

“Sure, I figured I owed you.”

“You think Uther could help? I’m sure he would be overjoyed to take an unholy chosen out of the world. But he might know someone that can heal, at least long enough to get him stable and talking.”

“Good point,” said Matt, getting out his phone. After a moment he talked to someone on the other end, and turned it off again.

“He says not to rely on his getting here in time to do anything. But he’ll try to get here.”

“The Watchers know we’re here,” said Socks, now fully healed again. “They might get here first. Thank you, Iris.”

“If worse comes to worst we could take him to Zephyr,” said Matt.

“You really are great at looking past inconvenient things,” said Liz. “Do you remember that Zephyr wanted Sam corrupted or dead because of some prophesy or whatever he was going to wipe out their way of life again? Do you remember them being evil? They would just stand there and laugh, and laugh if you showed up with a dying Sam and some dude they don’t even know to ask for healing. Oh, and they don’t have any holy power either, in case you forgot. So really, what are they going to do?”

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“I was just saying as a last resort-”

“No, the last resort is we kill this guy, here, and hope that breaks the curse or whatever he put on Socks. Then Socks takes us to the Watcher’s place and maybe with this on their doorstep it’ll encourage them to act a little faster.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Oh great,” said Liz. “If someone heard the fight here and called the cops, we’re all in a lot of trouble.”

But when Matt went over to open it he found a bearded man and a woman in an odd ensemble there instead. The woman was wearing what looked like a cross between a nun’s outfit and a ninja uniform, in red. The bearded guy was just dressed normally.

“Looks like things are pretty well in hand here,” said the guy, stepping inside. “Hey, you don’t look so good.”

“You must be Sam,” said the woman, kneeling down beside him. “I can remove this unholy affliction you’ve been given.”

“Thank you,” Sam croaked.

She put a hand on Sam’s arm and concentrated. “This place has been desecrated, we’ll need to go outside,” she said. “Help me with him.”

The man helped Sam up, and they went outside. Matt followed, wondering if she should look at him as well, because his angel had been touched.

“Now can I eat him?” Elizabeth whispered.

“Just a second, we need to find out about the curse thing. If Moon goes away you’re free to help yourself.” She followed them out. *Now, will you still follow my orders if I’m not there?*

Outside, Sam was already looking better and the “nun” was looking at the space around Matt. “I’ve never had to heal a guardian angel before,” she remarked. “But I guess I’ll try.”

Suddenly another car pulled up, and a man obviously in spirit form got out.

Another person driving who could be teleporting. What is wrong with these people?

“So you did find some help after all?” he asked.

“Yes, they just arrived. But thanks for coming just the same,” said Sam. “I thought I was a goner there.”

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“Not a problem. This unholy chosen is taken care of, then?”

“We’re keeping him alive, at the moment, inside. We didn’t know if killing him would break the curse he put on Socks or not.”

“No, it won’t. We’ll have to get him to remove it, himself.”

“Oh. Well, in that case you better hurry. He’s unconscious and bleeding in there, being held together by my... by a technique I figured out to use.”

“Let’s see him, then.”

They all went back inside, and Elizabeth looked disappointed.

“I don’t get to eat him, do I?” she asked.

“No, if you do Socks will stay cursed. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Really?”

“What is this?” asked Uther.

“Are you referring to her or her?” Liz asked, pointing to the two women that were there. Elizabeth gave a little wave.

“We can worry about that later,” said the nun, touching the man’s leg. “We’ll take him with us, wake him up, and get him to remove the curse on Socks, one way or the other. It’s not something that should be done here.”

Are they talking about torture? Both Liz and I had the same thought. Liz, however, didn’t seem as troubled by that prospect as I did.

“Good luck,” said Matt.

“We might need it,” said the man, lifting him over his shoulders. “Stay here, I’ll come back for you in a moment. Socks?”

The nun and Socks went and touched the man, who vanished with a pop.

“Anything else I can do for you?” asked Uther.

Matt shook his head. “Thanks for coming anyway, it’s not a pleasant feeling walking into something like this and not knowing if someone will actually show if we get in trouble.”

“Sure thing. Figure it’s the least I can do, since Rosilita went and got herself killed like that. It’s what she would have wanted.”

Went and got herself killed? thought Liz. *Honestly.*

“See you kids later!” He walked back to his car and drove away.

“I guess we get to wait until that guy shows back up to take us home,” said Sam, looking around the place. “Let’s go outside, it stinks of zombie in here.” He paused. “Wow, never thought I would get to say that.”

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“You two can wait,” said Liz, going over to Dliz. “I’ll ride Dliz home.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Matt, concerned.

“I promised I’d make it up to her, she can hunt a deer or something. Both of us have to keep our word if this is going to work.”

“Get on,” said Dliz, turning back into a nine-tailed fox. “Let me show you what the night is all about.”

They left, leaving Matt and Sam to look concerned at her sudden acceptance of Dliz.

I, too, wondered what her new attitude meant for the future.

Getting Ahead

*You'll be groaning about the title of
this chapter in a few minutes.*

Things stayed quiet for about a month after that, and Liz focused on building her prison for Delizabeth. Try as she might, even after all that time she could not lift into place the twenty-first plate. She stood looking quizzically at it, then shrugged and gave up.

She started to feel a little better, and even began to look forward to the trip to Washington the last week of May. Matt was worried about what Zephyr was doing, and after some badgering, convinced Liz to help him get down there again to check things out. From what they could see, things were pretty quiet down in the temple with everyone just sort of doing their own thing.

“As long as they haven’t killed the students, I’m satisfied,” said Matt.

“Why would they do that?” asked Elizabeth. “After all that time they spent training us, they’re not just going to lead us to a slaughterhouse. And anyway, doesn’t this fish guy get stronger the more worshipers he has? They’re going to try and corrupt everyone, not kill them!”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Of course.”

Liz also set about patching things up between her and Lyn, and once Lyn heard about what Liz was going through, she seemed to understand better and forgave her. They decided to be roommates in Washington, as it was better for people with powers to stick together so they could cover for

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each other if something happened. She was still moping around a bit, and her inner landscape had only shown slight signs of recovery.

It was difficult, even for her, to stay moody while everyone around her was excitedly chatting about the trip, and finally May 24th came around. I followed after them as they visited certain historical sites, after traveling to the place uneventfully. Liz even went to bed that night amazed that they had spent a whole day in a new place and nothing had tried to rip anyone's face off.

Turned out that had been scheduled for the next evening.

“What’s going on over there?” asked Sam, pointing to a crowd of people over by a monument. The kids were being taken around at night when certain statues and things were lit up, and there seemed to be some commotion near one of them. Apparently this was the “Lincoln Memorial,” a large statue of a man sitting in a chair.

As the four got closer they saw that the statue was headless, apparently having been sheered right through. The head was just lying there on the ground where it had fallen.

“That’s weird. Who could do that and get away with it without anyone seeing it?” asked Liz.

“Something supernatural?” replied Matt.

“What supernatural thing would chop the head off a statue? Eating some guy, yes. Kidnapping them to feed off fear? Sure thing. Defacing a statue? I’m not so sure.”

“We could still look into it.”

“Sure, why not? Would be terrible if some other statue lost its head around here because we're the self appointed protectors of humanity wherever we go. You have seen the definition of the word ‘vacation’ at some point, right?”

“Evil never sleeps,” said Sam in a funny voice.

“Of course it does!” retorted Liz. “It just has more fun when it’s awake.”

The kids were herded back to the bus area as police arrived and started setting up a parameter, so Liz didn’t get a chance to do anything until she got back to the hotel room. She glanced at the TV that was playing in the lobby and saw it was already on the news.

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Finding a quiet place to chant, Liz called upon the moon spirit's power and asked it if anything strange was wandering the night nearby.

"A dark power stalks the night, seeking the most important thing it has lost. It is hunting heads of those that are not alive."

What do you know? I guess it is supernatural. Could some demon's head have been sealed away in a statue around here, and it broke free?

Heading back to see the boys, she stopped by Matt and Sam's room. Gesturing them out into the hall, she explained what the moon spirit was able to convey to her.

"It seems you were right, our magnetic trouble catcher is still turned up to 11."

"So let's go crack some heads, before some more heads get cracked?" Sam trailed off at the end.

"Yeah, that didn't work," said Matt.

"What do you suggest, sneaking out? You're fine, but the rest of us might be missed."

"We've got to get there. We can't have some monster smashing up statues around here, right?"

"Good point. Do you know how many statues are around here? You think we're going to just happen across the creature doing this?"

"You're the one that said we were magnets."

"I'm saying let's use our *heads* and try to *head* this thing off so we don't spend all night chasing where it was and instead go to where it will be."

"You want to see if Lyn will help?" asked Matt.

"Exactly. That's using your head."

So Liz went back to her room, where her roommates were watching the breaking news about a wounded security guard that had come forward about a bizarre story relating to the recent vandalism.

"It was some kind of headless monster riding a black horse," he was saying.

Great, it can be seen by normal people then...

"Hey Lyn, come here," Liz pulled her out into the hall. "How do you feel about using your powers now? We need some help trying to find where this creature is going to be so we don't chase it all over town all night."

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“I suppose it would be all right. I’m out of practice though.”

“We’ll take anything we can get at this point.”

“I’ll give it a shot.”

Ten minutes later Lyn came out of her trance and said “Yes, I saw something. It is some kind of headless horseman, like the news said. He was whipping the head off of Thomas Jefferson with some weird spine whip thing.”

“A weird spine/whip thing? Right. So this was happening right this second?”

“I can’t tell. Could be ten minutes ago, could be thirty seconds from now, could be tomorrow.”

“I guess we’ll have to chance it. Humm... going to be cutting it close to get back by the time we’re supposed to be in bed. We better hurry. You want to come along?”

“If he’s not there you’ll need me to try again, right? You won’t want to have to keep coming back here.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks for the help.”

“It’s okay.”

Connor offered to come, but there wasn’t room for five on Tabeyume, so he agreed to stay behind and run interference if the mission went long. They thanked him and started looking for openings to sneak out.

Too bad, maybe being in danger would hasten his awakening powers. Not that he has a teacher (I’m not bitter) but we can use all the help we can get. And if he’s just going to rush into stuff like we do, being normal is going to be a big handicap for him.

So the four snuck out, aided by being able to walk through walls thanks to Liz, and Matt called on Tabeyume. It was a tight squeeze, but after explaining the situation, all four managed to get on and ride him towards the Jefferson Memorial.

“So do we have a plan?” asked Matt, after the baku ran on air for several minutes.

“It’s the same plan as always,” answered Liz. “Try to talk him out of it or find out his reasons for doing this. If he attacks, we defend ourselves, winding up killing it. Why?”

“Just wondered, because he’s right below us.”

“I’ll stop him,” shouted Sam, leaping off of Tabeyume towards the ground.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Was he even listening?” asked Liz.

“I don’t think so.”

“And... he missed totally,” said Liz, watching him fall behind the creature. “Honestly, if you’re going to do something, at the very least try to do it properly.”

Tabeyume leapt down in front of the figure, who was dressed in an old looking suit and riding a magnificent black stallion. The man was headless, but that didn’t seem to stop him from perceiving this threat from above. He brought his arm up and a human spine appeared in his hand, which he began waving like a whip.

“Stand aside, mortals! Or be struck down!” said a voice that seemed to come from the creature.

“We’re not attacking you!” shouted Liz. “Wait!”

For a wonder, the horse did come to a halt.

“Why are you attacking these monuments?” asked Matt.

“I don’t have to answer to you, human child!”

“But we can help you. We want to help you,” said Liz.

“Help? Such a thing is unheard of. It must be some trick by he who stole my head these two days passed.”

“Two days? What year do you think it is?” asked Matt.

The horse reared up in answer.

“Do you think me a fool? Away with you!”

“The time doesn’t matter,” said Liz, shooting Matt a dirty look. “We have powers, we can help you.”

But the horse gathered itself and leapt over the baku, then took off running again.

“Oh, nicely done,” Liz said sarcastically. “‘What year do you think it is?’ Really? Who cares what year he thinks it is? We needed to get him to trust us, not drive him away.”

“At least he didn’t attack us,” said Lyn.

“Yes, odd that. He seemed rather belligerent otherwise.”

Sam jogged up. “Great job keeping him here. He’s getting away, let’s go after him!”

“We know he’s after his head now,” said Liz, sliding off the baku. “Come on Lyn, let’s allow the two boys their chest thumping while we girls actually do the tough work of thinking, as usual.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Yeah, try to convince him we're on his side, rather than just jumping on him from above and then implying he's an idiot.”

“Okay, okay.”

Sam leapt onto Tabeyume's back and they took off again, while Liz started chanting again.

A minute later she had applied the moon spirit's power to Lyn, increasing her insightfulness.

“He's looking for the right thing in the wrong place,” said Lyn. “It's a statue right enough as far as I can tell, but not one that people know about. I'm close, if I could just get his cooperation I'm sure I could find this head of his.”

Liz and Lyn then took off towards the monument, but were too late when they arrived. The officers guarding the place looked like they had been cut down, and Sam was currently grappling the creature on the ground. He brought his fist back to punch the creature in the stomach when suddenly it disappeared. The horse seemed to shake its head, and galloped off.

Tabeyume scooped up Sam and vanished.

“Oh, the boys did an excellent job at diplomacy,” Liz said sarcastically as they walked up. “And now they're all gone. But I see the statue is safe, so their priorities are certainly in order.”

“I think they're dead,” Lyn said, going to look at one of the officers.

“To find they were alive would have been the bigger shock for me. Let's check the others and get out of here. We don't want to be seen hanging around this place when more cops show up. We would have to explain why we're out here and surrounded by dead people.”

“That would be difficult. You said this was typical? Just how many bad things have you seen? I thought you were exaggerating when you told me about stuff.”

Liz shook her head sadly. “You don't want to know. You really don't.”

A few moments later, away from the monument, Matt, Sam and the ghostly rider appeared and made their way over to the girls.

“We've reached an understanding,” said Matt. “He won't attack anyone else while we help him.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Did you have to kill those officers back there?” asked Liz.

“Yes,” the creature said simply.

Liz paused. “Oh, as long as you’re sure,” she said sarcastically. “Lyn here is a seer, she’ll try to pinpoint your head for you.”

“Very well.”

“I’ll need to touch you?” said Lyn timidly.

“Then be about it, girl, I haven’t all night.”

Why do we agree to help things like this again? thought Liz.

I was just thinking how noble you were to help even those that are rude to you.

Lyn went over and touched the guy’s sleeve, then concentrated.

“The head has a body now. It seems to be moving on its own. I see a face. A see a name. It’s a street. A street sign. Yes, the head is there, I’m sure of it.”

“Then lead on, and let this business be done.”

Everyone climbed onto the baku again and he took off, flanked by the horseman. Several moments later they came to an apartment building.

Lyn concentrated again, trying to narrow it down.

“I’m sure it’s in there, in the basement I guess.”

Liz asked Anthy about anything strange down there.

“The energies of the Earth are being manipulated and focused,” was her reply.

“So watch were you step,” said Liz. “It’ll probably be a fight, because I guess that’s how the world works. I’ll give us the ability to throw lighting again, Matt. Unless you want it too, Lyn?”

“I don’t know about throwing lighting...”

“It could come in handy, you never know.”

She chanted for a few minutes and my sensors registered energy settling around the three.

She also called out “Strawberry Moon: Materialize!” and the familiar figure of the Moon Spirit appeared nearby.

“Okay, let’s go.”

The horseman waved a hand as he approached the door, and it sprang open. They headed down some stairs and came to a hallway with many doors.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“How do we know which is the right door?” asked Sam.

“Smash them all down!” replied the horseman.

“Or Tabeyume can just poke his head through and see what the situation is on the other side?” suggested Liz.

“As long as there is action!”

Tabeyume stuck his head through and on the third try, someone yelled from inside the apartment.

“I think we've found our culprit,” said Liz.

Again the horseman waved a hand, and the door sprung open. He marched inside, followed by the others.

Inside was a man with dark skin, working on some kind of statue or armor that was standing in the center of the floor. It was a deep red color, and the eyes of the thing were large and glowing. It had a wide grin, and stood motionless as the shocked man watched his home being invaded by kids. Kids and a very angry energy manifestation.

“Give me back what is mine,” he said to the man.

“Oh crap! Hey, uh, you lost it, so finders keepers?”

Seriously, is this man four or forty?

A geyser of blood shot from the horseman's hand, striking the man in the chest and knocking him backwards. “You think I am to be trifled with?” shouted the horseman. Sadly, the statue didn't seem to take kindly to this action, as it seemed to come to life as the man slumped over. It made a sort of roaring noise and started charging the group.

The horseman sent his odd whip whistling at the figure, but it bounced off without harm. Tabeyume stepped in front of Matt to protect him, and Liz focused on her hand, making her weapon appear.

Maybe I can cut the head off, my sickle must be sharper than that spine, right?

Sam rushed in front of everyone and threw a punch at the metal monster, which caught his fist and held it.

“Hey!” said Sam, trying to get free.

Strawberry Moon tried to get behind the creature and Liz mentally directed it to try and pry the head off of the body. Her hair started searching for cracks in the armor.

The creature used Sam as a bludgeon, swinging him into the horseman and knocking him over. Sam of course was yelling as his fist was being crushed by this thing.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Can you stop it or not?” Liz shouted to him.

“Give me a second,” Sam retorted.

But not much more, thought Liz. I bet if I kill that man, whatever energy fuels this thing will stop. I may have to do that if things keep going badly for us.

Wow, she has changed. Elizabeth would never have thought like that!

Iris appeared in a burst of fire, and started looking around. She noticed the man down on the ground, covered in blood, and flapped over to him.

Liz began charging energy, and my sensors registered it was all she could use at one time. *She’s serious about killing him, then.*

Sam used his left hand to swing a punch at the arm that was holding him, which tore it off and sent him flying.

“I’m okay,” said from where he was smashed into the wall.

The thing tried to swing at Strawberry Moon, but it missed as she dodged out of the way. Her hair was still questing for cracks in the armor.

Matt shot electricity at it, which jolted it and left a scorch mark on it’s body.

Oh, so you can be hurt by this stuff, huh? Maybe your creator won’t have to die tonight after all.

Putting another burst of energy into the attack, Liz forced double the energy she normally could spend into a tremendous bolt of power, and when the flash cleared away, the thing was in pieces scattered all about the room.

“That wasn’t so bad,” she remarked. “I guess I can see Derren’s point. There is some satisfaction in blowing stuff up.”

“My head, where? Ah, here it is. Sort of.”

The horseman struggled to lift the “helmet” of the creature, and turned it this way and that. The eyes were still glowing.

“It is still trapped in this hideous form! Wake that man up and I shall demand he put this to rights!”

“I don’t think he’s going to be waking up any time soon,” said Iris. “He’s been hurt pretty bad.”

“Check the bathroom, see if there’s a first aid kit or something,” Liz said to Matt. “Sam, bring a bucket and some water, I need to see how much of this blood is his.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Okay.”

Liz rather expertly assessed the man’s condition and bandaged him up.

“I don’t think he’ll die right away, but that’s all I can do for him. You really don’t know any angels that can heal, Matt?”

Matt shook his head.

“What have you been doing the past month, anyway?”

“Uh...”

“What have *you* been doing?” asked Sam. “Don’t spirit energists have some kind of healing power? Or a spirit that can heal?”

Liz tapped her head. “I’ve been building a prison in my mind, if you must know. And I can’t learn any new techniques or spirits without a teacher, now can I? Matt carries his teacher around with him.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

“That is a point though, maybe Socks can give me some pointers when we get back. I’ll ask him. That doesn’t help this poor sod though.”

“A hospital is out. It would take too long and there would be a lot of questions,” said Matt. “I’ll see if the Watchers have a local office or something.”

And so Runs to Petition Backup uses the unbridled power of his cell phone while our heroes stand around uselessly, as always, thought Liz. Tune in next week when they once again try to engage the enemy and fail spectacularly!

Matt dialed a number and explained the situation to Socks.

“He said he’ll see what he can do,” Matt said. “I guess we just have to wait.”

Elizabeth picked up a melted chunk of the metal that used to be the creature’s body. “Might as well take a souvenir. This is some weird metal though, let me tell you.” She slipped it into her pocket.

Moments later a man who looked like a priest, accompanied by a woman with a shotgun came into the apartment building.

“I’m from the Watchers, and I see the man I was called upon to heal,” said the man.

“Thank you for arriving so quickly,” said Liz.

“You did well with his bandages,” remarked the man.

“Thanks.”

The man touched him and concentrated, and he began to stir. His eyes opened.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Guess he lost then,” he said.

“Yeah, what was that, exactly?” said Liz, pointing to the bits now blown around the room.

“It was my golem. Usually they're kind of stupid, so I was trying to make a smarter one.”

“Let me know how that works out- oh wait.”

“Restore my head, mortal, or face my wrath a second time!”

“Why should I?”

“Because,” Matt said, stepping in front of him, “we're asking nicely. Because of you, several police officers died tonight, plus there's the whole damage to public property charge. What's the law against stealing someone's head and using it to make a golem?”

“Well... I guess the nearest would be ‘don't get caught?’” answered the man.

“Seriously?”

“It's a grey area,” said the man. “Naturally we don't encourage such behavior, and because his actions resulted in deaths, we'll have to take him in. But on the books, experimenting with spirits like our friend the dullahan here isn't technically illegal because they aren't people.”

“The outrage-” started the horseman.

“However,” Liz broke in. “I'm sure the man realizes the error of his ways and for the chance at lenience in this matter, I'm sure he'll swiftly put the head back to the way it should be. And he will be punished according to our laws, correct?”

The man nodded.

“Very well. If he is swift.”

“Bring it here,” said the man, rising. The Dullahan thrust the head forward, and the man touched it, reshaping it into a grinning head again.

“Finally,” said the dullahan. “But if I have learned one thing this night, it is that human children are not as useless as I once thought. I will not forget this.”

I'm going to try, thought Liz.

“Come, stand before me and I shall reward you appropriately!”

Liz perked up a little.

The horse stepped out of nowhere and he climbed atop it, holding his head under his arm. The others hesitantly stepped forward.

“A simple gift for your actions this night. Then I bid you farewell!”

The dullahan raised a hand, and blood gushed out from it, covering the room and all in it. He laughed, reared his horse, and was gone.

LEARNING THE WORLD

Everyone stood in stunned silence for a moment.

“It’s a true honor,” said Liz, wiping her eyes. She looked like she was either trying not to wretch or laugh.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Matt.

“At least he didn’t attack us with it,” said the woman.

“I don’t suppose it grants us any special powers or abilities?” Liz asked. The man, looking shell shocked, mutely shook his head.

“That figures.”

“How are we going to explain this?” asked Lyn. “We can’t go back looking like we murdered dozens of people and then swam in their blood!”

“Perhaps our new friend will have some means of cleaning us off?” ventured Matt, looking at him.

“Fine, wait here.”

Strawberry Moon, (who was insubstantial at the time and thus, still clean) floated after him to make sure he didn’t try to get away. However he just came back with some vials of liquid which he splashed over everyone, which washed the blood off with supernatural efficiency.

The priest and shotgun toting woman thanked the group for their efforts and hauled the guy off, and Liz locked up the apartment.

“Though it’s going to start stinking in there very soon. Maybe they’ll send a cleanup crew or something. Oh well, not our problem,” said Liz. “Let’s get back before we’re missed.”

Conner had done his job admirably, and only the roommates of the group really noticed they were missing. Each made some excuse and went to bed, then spent the rest of the time in Washington uneventfully.

School was almost out for the year, and Liz tried to ignore the growing sense of unease in her heart.

Are the spirits restless or is it just me? I really, really hope it’s just me.

To Make an Ending

Oh look, the Foundation FINALLY shows up.

The next two weeks passed uneventfully, with Liz getting a bit of training from Socks in the very limited healing technique available to spirit energists. She also spent a lot of her time finishing her inner prison, carrying plate after plate of metal and welding them in place. When it was done, Sunday, June 13th, she took DElizabeth down to see it.

Odd that suddenly she's able to lift those plates again, I thought. It seems it's only possible after she has some kind of "adventure" with her friends. Perhaps the knowledge of living through something gives her an inner strength, allowing her dreaming self the ability to move them?

"As you can see, I've kept my word and the door is not locked. If I want Anthy, I get Anthy. If I want you, I get you. If you don't go "wandering" again you can still have run of my inner space and at least know what's going on around me. If you come out and play nice, everything stays the way it is now and life is good for everybody. We're clear on that, right?"

"I understand."

"Then my business here is done."

She woke up that Monday feeling better than she had in a while, as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. But looking around outside while waiting for the bus she still sensed the spirits were trying to tell her something.

LEARNING THE WORLD

That afternoon, during lunch, a vibrationally separate student made her way over to Liz and the others. She was wearing a sort of robe with a fish design on it, and her hair was tangled and dirty.

“Do you still remember me?” she asked, as though she had given up hope.

“Sure,” said Matt. “cambion. It’s Julie, right? Didn’t you go with Zephyr?”

“You do? Oh, that’s fantastic! I really hope you can help. I did go with them, yes, and that’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What, not all they’re cracked up to be?” asked Liz. “What a shock. And if experience is any guide, no, we can’t help, so go away.”

“Sit down, of course we’ll help,” said Sam. “What’s going on with the old cult down there, anyway?”

“A lot of bad stuff,” she replied, sitting down. “I’ve had about as much of it as I can take, but the others... I’m worried about them.”

“They aren’t planning some big sacrifice or something, are they?” asked Matt.

“I don’t think so. I don’t know, exactly. It’s just getting really intense, and the brainwashing is, like, through the roof now.”

“What do you want us to do about it?” asked Liz. “We tried and tried to get someone- anyone- to take care of them months ago. Guess what? We failed. What makes you think we’ll succeed now?”

“Don’t be like that,” said Matt. “She’s come to her senses and is asking for our help. We can’t just turn her down.”

“Or she’s been sent to lure us into a trap because we didn’t forget them like we were supposed to. Why should we trust her?”

“Please, you have to help. I’m sorry I went with them before, but honestly it seemed like such a good idea at the time!”

“They could have used powers on you,” said Sam. “Made you more suggestible or something. I wouldn’t beat myself up about it.”

“We can at least tell the society about her, maybe they can put her in protective custody or something. You know they’re going to notice you’re missing sooner or later.”

“I know.”

“Maybe with a more first hand account it might spur them to a little more action?” asked Sam.

“It’s worth a shot. For the moment, Socks has been hanging around giving Liz lessons, he can watch over you until Uther can get here. You can tell both of them your story at the same time, so you don’t have to repeat it. Seems easier that way.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“He’s a cat,” put in Liz.

“I’m going to be protected by a cat?”

“He’s not just a cat. Hang on,” said Matt, dialing his phone.

After hanging up, Matt nodded. “He agreed to watch over you. He’s going to wait by the front entrance. We’ll see you after school, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks.”

“You really think it’s a trap?” Sam asked Liz.

“Hard to say. It’s a little late for that sort of thing, I guess. I just have to wonder, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

That afternoon, Uther and Socks got together with Liz and the others, and were joined by another man. He had white hair and yellow eyes, and introduced himself as “Professor DeVille,” a breath stealer. He noted everyone’s name down in a book he carried with him, and looked up from it.

Elizabeth was humming softly to herself while he wrote. *Professor DeVille, Professor DeVille. If he doesn’t scare you, then nobody will*, she was thinking. I made a mental note to look that up later.

“Nice to meet you all. I hear from Socks you’ve had some troubles lately, and I wanted to apologize on behalf of the Foundation for not taking a more active interest.”

Troubles? That’s putting it mildly.

“In any case, we’re here now. Late to the party I know, but from what I hear, you kids have done a commendable job with what little training you’ve gotten. You’ve at the very least slowed them down a little, and by not disappearing into their cult, you’ve let us know they’re here. You’ve done well, and I’m proud of you.”

Sam and Matt beamed.

You wouldn’t be saying that if you really knew what we went through, thought Liz sourly.

“Anyway, Julie, please tell us what you came here to tell us. And start at the beginning, if you would, so I can get totally caught up.”

So Julie talked for about fifteen minutes about what happened after the dance. Liz and the others spoke up when she faltered or missed a detail, and soon enough it came to the part where they left, and what she had been doing since then.

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Apparently they’ve been around six thousand years or so, since the great flood. The All-Father tried to wipe them out because they were too powerful, but he didn’t get all of them. These now really hate him, and worship this half fish guy named Dagon. They believe only he believes in them and loves them.

“They talk all the time about humans being just pests, and how they should be ruling the Earth as the All-Father’s original creations. They have been making us do daily rituals to this Dagon, like blood sacrifices and stuff, and that’s not the worst part.

“They admitted they were the ones that gave us powers, and now that the experiment has been proven to work, they’re soon going to expand to other places- start training others like they did us. Soon they’ll have an army and they’ll take over the world.”

“Troubling,” said DeVille, “Very troubling. But it does tie some things up we’ve been dealing with on our end as well. All right, with you gone they’ll know something’s up. I think it would be best if our three groups selected the best people available and went down to finish this.”

“I agree,” said Uther.

“What about the students?” asked Matt. “One of the reasons your groups didn’t rush down there before was because of the potential for collateral damage.”

“Which, may I remind you,” put in Liz, “is higher now that these kids have been trained, and brainwashed, for another two months or so since they left.”

“We’ll do our best not to harm them if we can help it,” said Uther. “Just what sort of force is down there, anyway?”

“There’s about fifteen Zephyr people, three people that wander around in robes that seem to be priests, and two giant looking creatures that are really ugly. Oh, and every so often some pudgy guy holding a weird rock shows up to talk to them. I’ve heard whispers he’s the one that actually gave everyone powers, and they seem both terrified and in awe of the guy. Haven’t seen him in a while though.”

“That’s it?” asked Liz, looking at Uther. “We begged for help, but spirit hunter society was scared of fifteen people?”

“We couldn’t know-”

“And didn’t bother to find out.”

“Please!” said DeVille. “Mistakes have been made, I admit that. But now we have to focus on today, not what could have been done months ago.”

LEARNING THE WORLD

“Fine. I just think it’s a bit funny that suddenly everyone is in a big hurry, when it was us, months ago, saying to spirit hunters that they would regret not helping us sooner. Looks like I was right after all.”

Uther at least had the decency to look embarrassed.

“Are you willing to continue helping?” asked DeVille.

“No question!” said Sam immediately.

“I’m happy to petition things,” said Matt.

“We were there when this started, it seems only fitting we’re there when it ends,” said Liz.

“Thank you. We’ll meet here in 24 hours with what forces we can muster and make our final plans then.”

The other two agreed, and they all disappeared.

“What about me?” asked Julie.

“You can stay over at my place,” offered Matt.

“Yeah, your parents are the only ones that know about powers, so if she knocks something over they won’t think the house is haunted,” said Liz.

That evening, Liz updated her secret journal with the latest happenings, and wrote a goodbye note for her mother.

I’ll leave the whole thing in my desk, she thought. If I don’t come back my room will be searched, so they’ll find it easily. It’s all I can do, short of telling my mom the truth. But I think this is the way to do it, she’ll just try to stop me going if I tell her now. And she’ll be worried all night, and I don’t want to put her through that. If I just don’t come back because something happened, at least her last memories of me will be good ones. Rather than feeling sick about my activities these past few months. She’ll get closure, if she believes the journal, anyway. And maybe someone from the Foundation will come explain things. One way or another, this time tomorrow it’ll all be over.

The note went like this:

I’m sorry I didn’t get to say a proper goodbye to you or Ivy or Zach or dad. I guess we failed, in the end. We were supposed to win, and come back, and life would go back to normal. Whatever that means for a person that can do what I do. You could have stayed ignorant and not have to be afraid of every shadow, like I am now. That some creature is lurking there to eat you or steal your soul or whatever.

LEARNING THE WORLD

I don't know what our losing means. If a group of highly trained professionals couldn't overcome 15 people, the world is in trouble. I would say to get away from this place, but if we lost, I doubt anywhere is safe. See, even my final words to you are depressing, that's what I've become now.

Take heart: Heaven exists, and if what Matt's angel said is true I at least have a decent shot of getting there. More now, if I died trying to destroy a cult that the All-Father couldn't destroy Himself. That counts for something, right? So don't go murdering anybody and some day I'll see you all again. I love you all, and thank you for everything.

The next afternoon more than 30 people gathered at the school, in various forms. There were spirit hunters with odd looking weapons, short people, tall people, even a man dressed in what my database showed as “stereotypical wizard.” Sam had left his body behind, and stashed it someplace safe, where it might be found in a few hours if he failed to return. The kids looked very nervous. I thought they had a right to be. With the hundreds and hundreds of people with powers on the planet, three different organizations couldn't even gather a force equal to twice what they would be facing today? I had seen battles that stretched across solar systems, or that were fought between tribes with stone tools, and numbers were the most important consideration in any skirmish. If these Zephyr people could learn any power and also had thousands of years to hone their skills, I would have insisted on at least a five to one ratio. I just hoped they knew what they were doing.

“The plan is simple,” said DeVille. “We go down there and surprise them. Kill the progenitors, knock out the kids. Any questions?”

I have one, I thought. Where are the talismans? Why are wards not being passed out to everyone? Why are spirits not being called? What other pre-battle powers exist I don't even know about yet? Magic? These people have the most important resource right now, time, they should be gearing up in a big way. But that isn't happening. WHY?

There were none, and so DeVille asked us where we should go to most quickly get there.

They decided on the cemetery, as that was really the only place they could show on a map so the “wizard” could teleport them.

LEARNING THE WORLD

The magic user waved his hands, and the field was empty.

Liz called upon the only spirits she knew, Moon and Thunderbird, increasing their Luck and Reflexes.

Goodness knows we're going to need all the luck we can get, going down there like this.

Once they reached the end of the tunnels a summoner sent an Imp down the passageway, and he reported back.

"Looks like they're evacuating down there," he reported.

"Thanks."

"Okay," said DeVille. "I want you kids to hang back. This isn't your fight. But we still need this passage guarded if anyone tries to get out this way. They'll be focusing on us, so you shouldn't have anyone but weaklings coming this way. This is your last chance to just turn around and go home."

Can any thousand year old creature be considered a "weakling?" Everything is relative, after all.

They all shook their heads.

"Anything else anyone wants to do, better do it now."

Spirit hunters called upon their spirit weapons, and more things were summoned.

Matt started petitioning, but Liz stopped him.

"Wait, just get something generic, then I can copycat it and we can get twice as many."

"Good point," he said, changing his ritual. Soon four stern looking women with spears appeared. One of them pointed their weapon at Liz.

"Mortal! Explain yourself. Why have you brought us here?"

Oh, come on, thought Liz. Fine, they want dramatic, I can do dramatic.

"We go into glorious battle. Join us, sisters!" she shouted.

They just looked skeptical.

"No really, what's going on?" she said, looking everyone over.

"In short, we're wiping out a cult of Dagon," said Matt. "Will you agree to help us?"

"Followers of Dagon? That *will* be a glorious battle, the girl was right." She nodded to Liz. "My apologies for doubting you. We will happily lend our aid."

LEARNING THE WORLD

One of the woman went over to a man and kissed his forehead, which he looked stunned about.

What's that all about? I asked myself, as the other's attitude towards him instantly changed.

With everyone ready the group made their way down the path, and soon the battle was on. It was chaos down in the city, and from where Liz and her group were situated, only flashes of light and the battle with the two giant figures could really be seen. Three of the warrior women went with the main group, one stayed behind.

"Now what's he up to?" asked Liz, pointing down into the city. The others looked, and saw Derren sneaking around.

"We better go see," said Sam.

"Are you nuts? Take on a... oh, fine, whatever," said Liz.

"Don't go just yet," said a voice. Turning, the group saw six cambion students step out of the shadows.

"Guys," said Julie. "You don't have to do this. They're lying to us, can't you see that? They aren't the good guys here, you must see that!"

"Quiet, traitor," said one. "You lost the right to speak to us when you brought outsiders here."

"They're pretty far gone," said Sam. "Look, get going. I'll hold this lot off."

"Are you sure?" asked Matt.

"Please. The hardest thing will be holding back enough to not kill them all instantly. Go on, he's getting away!"

"Come on," said Matt, pulling Liz down the path. "He knows what he's doing."

Sam called out his spirit weapon, and the cambions charged. Liz turned and ran with Mat down the path. "Stay with him, don't kill them if you can avoid it," Matt said to the woman. She hung back and engaged a cambion with her spear butt.

It didn't take long for Liz and Matt to catch up to Derren. He was tying a pouch to his belt, and looked over at them.

"Do you really want to do this?" he asked them.

"No, I don't," answered Liz. "But it's something that has to be done."

"You're right, of course," he said, running a hand through his hair. "If even one of us escapes, the plan still goes forward. The army gets made, and all organizations that oppose us get ground into dust."

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“Grind this into dust,” said Matt, throwing lightning at him. Derren stepped to the side and it missed. He shook a finger at Matt, then pointed at Liz.

“If you defeat me your power will no longer be under your control.”
Okay? What?

“There,” he said, as if something significant just happened. “Now you can just stand and watch while I kill Matt here. Because you know what will happen if you don’t.”

Uh, no I don’t, actually. Liz just looked at him like he had gone nuts.

Matt wasted no time, directing his energy bolt up to the ceiling this time, and making stone and dust fall near Derren.

“You really aren’t very good at that, are you?” Derren said, charging him. A blade made of light appeared in his hand, and he swung at Matt, sparks flying as Terathel deflected the blow. As he was reeling back, Liz shot him in the back with electricity, and he cried out. The sword vanished from his hand.

He held up both hands and a wave of invisible force lashed out, knocking both against the wall behind them. It looked like someone’s luck was in, as the pouch he had been looking at fell off his belt. He looked down at it but shrugged.

Liz tried shooting him again, but while it looked like it was going to hit, he seemed unharmed.

Wait, what just happened? I asked myself. *There was no way that didn’t hit him!*

He casually walked over to Matt again and made a grab for him, and again, Terathel came into view, trying to knock his hand away. This time, however, Derren just made a grab for it, and seemed to yank the angel away from Matt’s body.

Well that can’t be good, thought Liz.

At that range, even Matt couldn’t miss, and another bolt of electricity went through Derren.

How much damage can this guy take? thought Liz. *He just got hit by lightning twice. You don’t walk away from that!*

I had the thought that Zephyr’s training was now coming back to bite them, as without the spirit of the Thunderbird that Liz had put on them, they would have been totally at his mercy right now.

He waved once more and they both went flying again, getting knocked over this time.

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As they got up, Derren totally healed himself.

See, this is what I was talking about. He's more than equal to the two of them. He knows how to counter what they can do (which isn't much) and has skills he probably never told them about. Without a five to one ratio they're just going to be overwhelmed.

"Ready for round two?" he asked, enjoying himself.

Should I call out Anthy? I never did test if Dlizabeth would stay put, and I probably should have before this. She might not want to attack the people that gave her life. Better not risk it for the moment.

My sensors registered Liz was building energy up inside herself, and Derren started casually walking towards them. Liz threw a sizzling bolt of power at him, but he activated a barrier and it glanced off.

Even I was starting to get annoyed with this guy. *That was a clean hit, how could his barrier be so strong?*

Matt called out Tabeyume, who looked around.

"Better call out the big guns," said Derren, looking at him. Suddenly, he was holding a large mace in his hand. "That'll do," he remarked. As he was looking down at it, Liz tried shooting him again, this time getting him in the head.

"Stop that!" he shouted at her, waving a hand. Tabeyume went flying towards her, forcing her to duck out of the way.

Darren touched his head, and healed it.

Liz now changed tactics a little, waiting until Tabeyume had rolled to his feet and leapt towards Derren before striking. Takeyume got hit in the body, but so did he. Matt also shot electricity at him, but missed.

"Would you stop?" he asked, starting to look perturbed.

"Why should they?" said Sam, dropping down from a building and taking a swing at Derren, which also missed.

Well, I have only a little energy left, time to roll the dice, thought Liz, and concentrated her remaining power on calling Anthy out to assist them.

She appeared behind Derren.

"More of you?" he shouted, "Then take this!" A burst of energy surrounded Derren, forcing everyone near him to throw themselves out of the way. Tabeume was looking pretty beat up, and in desperation threw himself at Derren, closing his jaws over the man's neck and biting straight through.

Why couldn't you have done that before? thought Liz. The body slumped to the ground.

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The head, looking shocked, looked over at Sam and said “That was a surprise. It looks like even Mordecai couldn’t change your destiny.”

Okay, creepy much? How can he talk, his lungs are over there.

It rolled over to Matt. “May your luck turn on you when you need it the most,” it said, as Matt took careful aim.

“Shut up,” he said, throwing one last bolt of energy at it and causing it to explode.

Ew.

“Sorry you didn’t get to do anything, Anthy- Uh...” Liz looked over to where Anthy was supposed to be, and was surprised to see Dizabeth standing there.

“Interesting,” she said, looking around. “It seems I get to be free after all.”

“Oh, come on!” shouted Liz. “This is just not fair!”

Dizabeth shrugged. “I didn’t ask for any of this, you know? Guess I have something else to thank these guys for.” She went over to the corpse of Derren, which had swiftly started to decompose. “The exit is that way, right?”

“You’re just leaving?” Liz asked her.

“I suppose I could walk you back there, make sure you got out of here alive. I owe you that much, being sort of my mother, and all.”

“It sounds like the fighting is dying down,” said Matt.

“Where did Sam go?” asked Liz, looking around. “I thought he was right here.”

“I am right here, stop kidding around,” said Sam.

Matt looked between them. “He’s right there. Don’t tell me you can’t see him anymore either?”

Liz shook her head, obviously terrified to be down here without any powers to draw upon.

“Come on, let’s head back to the entrance and try to figure all this out,” said Matt.

They watched as the temple fell, and the majority of the ones that had come down here started back towards the exit.

“You didn’t have to kill the students, did you?” asked Matt, noticing that no one was carrying any wounded kids.

“They were already gone,” said DeVille. “In fact, we only faced a few of the 15.”

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“Great,” remarked Liz. “Hope you're prepared for this to happen again and again the world over.”

“We know what to look for now. Seems you had some trouble,” he said, looking around at the unconscious cambions littering the floor.

“You have no idea,” said Liz.

After everyone was accounted for the group got teleported to a sort of office building/hospital room, and the Foundation people took stock of what had happened.

“You say he cursed you?” DeVille asked.

“Both of us,” said Liz. “Then my power just sort of walked away from me once we got back to the cave entrance. Can they really be powerful enough to just speak a new reality into existence? That stays around after they die? Wait, right, I forgot, the curse Socks was under would have stayed. I can't believe I forgot that! What I don't get is he specifically said 'you' while pointing at me. 'If *you* defeat me' he said, but I didn't, did I? I hardly hurt him, it was Tabeyume that tore the guy's head right off.”

“And you can't see unseen things anymore?”

“If by that you mean Sam and Tabeyume, yes.”

DeVille closed his eyes a moment, focusing his senses on Liz. “There's still something in you, but it's very faint. It's like you never had powers at all.”

“Great. Once again my inner demon gets to go off and slaughter whatever she wants, and I get to take the blame again.”

“We'll track her down, don't worry. We don't need a kumiho wandering around the world, now do we?”

“A half kumiho, half spirit projection,” Liz clarifies. “Which could still transfer damage to me, by the way, because why not?”

“We'll look into it. Your powers are too valuable to waste, if you can go toe to toe with a progenitor with your level of training. Imagine what you could do with a few years of training at your disposal? We'll help, it's the least we can do.”

“At the very least put down Dizabeth, so I don't have her killing whole towns worth of people on my conscience.”

“You got it.”

“So, is my luck really going to turn on me?” asked Matt.

“We'll look into that too, don't worry.”

“What do I do with these weird silver coins he was carrying?”

“Are those-?” Sister Valentine looked them over. “They are, they're the cursed silver pieces.”

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“Awful big on curses, these people. What do they do?”

“No one knows. There are 30 of them, total, and the legend says that if they're all brought together, something terrible will happen.”

“Some kind of evil, reverse, dragon from Dragon Ball Z?” asked Matt.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“In any case, I'll just take them,” she holds the pouch as far away from herself as possible. “I'll put them someplace safe, believe me.”

“I know you won't believe me, but we did do good today,” said DeVille.

“You're right, I don't believe you,” said Liz. “Mostly.”

“We're in a better position now with them scattered, I think. We know what to watch for, and their M.O. Our organizations are talking again instead of fighting, so we can put up a unified front against them. Exactly what they didn't want.”

Now if only you'd done that three months ago, thought Liz darkly.

“We better get back, the late busses will probably have left already,” said Liz. “Let me know about my powers, or whatever.” She walked over to the wizard guy.

“She's been kinda depressed lately,” explained Matt. “She's been going through a lot. I think she just got her inner demon under control, and now it's loose again. Please forgive her.”

“I understand. It couldn't have been easy for any of you. We'll be in touch.”

“Thanks.”

Back at the school, Sam animated his body again and said he was sorry Liz lost her powers.

“At least I got to see Anthy... for the second time, outside my head. Even if she didn't actually help in that fight.”

“Yeah, well...” Sam seemed a loss for words.

“What about Julie? Is she still around here someplace?”

“Didn't you hear us talking? Oh, I guess not. They're going to see what they can do for her, to get her parent's memories back. Or give them some new ones, so they know she's their daughter again. Don't worry, I think we'll be seeing more of them in the future.”

“What, to make up for us not seeing them in the past? Real helpful. See you guys.”

And with that Liz shouldered her school bag and dejectedly started the long walk home.

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Epilogue

“Warning,” my armor informed me. “Unknown energy pulse detected. Planetary scale.”

Planetary scale?! This was serious! I willed myself high above the planet, looking quickly to see if I could pinpoint the source. The Earth below me seemed to *ripple* and my armor indicated the energy had dissipated already.

“Cause of energy discharge?”

“Planet is no longer being surrounded by previously detected, low level energy field, believed to be a natural part of this planet’s evolution.” The armor showed me a picture of the world, with scrolling equations and such that explained the loss of the energy field in more detail. In essence, my previous planet wide scan had detected the energy, but simply recorded it as another feature of this world, rather than bringing it to my attention. And now, apparently, it had vanished without a trace.

On a hunch, I performed another planet wide scan, and asked my armor to compare the results.

“1% mismatch,” it informed me.

I stared down at the planet, speechless. One percent of the planet had somehow changed, an unheard of number given the time between scans. My armor would have ignored things like living things dying or other minor shifts, which would have been the expected result of time passing. To get a 1% number meant without warning, people who perhaps lived in one part of the country now lived in another, or had lived vastly different lives.

It seems the surprises this world has to offer have only begun.

I willed myself to Elizabeth’s house, where a man I had never seen before, standing rather awkwardly with a cane, was ringing her doorbell. Scanning him, I saw he carried various “talismans” on his person, and registered supernatural power within him.

Liz opened the door for him, and he grinned at her.

“Hello Liz,” he said, “How about we get you your powers back?”

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Notes from the author

As in book one, every attempt has been made to follow the official Paragon Demongate High setting rules exactly. The author, (that's me) wishes to note that this work was completed using a pre-production version of said rules and the old HDL version. Thus, certain things may have changed or no longer work in the same way between the novel and the rules. For example, the Ant spirit drastically changed to only allow the aid it gives to apply to untrained skills, not any skills. In this case, I probably would have changed Elizabeth's personality to be more in line with the dragonfly, rather than the ant, as she only used that ability for supernatural powers anyway. But reworking the whole novel because of this was not something I was prepared to do. So if you noticed her suddenly not offering to make use of this power in the story, when she had so often before; Congratulations, you were paying attention!

Secondly the requirements for learning to call out materialized spirits was greatly increased, and the number of abilities granted greatly decreased. This, in my opinion, makes them far less useful, and as we move into book 3 she will no longer be able to do so. Nor will she learn the technique later, it just isn't worth it for what you get. But she'll soon be able to *redacted*, which more than makes up for it. I've redistributed her XP as appropriate.

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!