

The Unveiled World

Demongate High Book 2

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For My Parents

Who never stopped believing in me
Who never stopped pushing me to be the best I could
Who never stopped loving me

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1

Reminiscing

“If memories were all I sang, I’d rather drive a truck.”--Rick Nelson

I notice that I am confused.

It is an odd feeling, and not exactly one I expected as I sat in my room, about to leave and start my second year of school at Demongate High. My room is clean, and what is not already in my dorm lies packed inside my talisman pouch, ready to be unloaded. Sunlight filters through the windows, creating upon the walls shadowy reminders of the Night Walker we faced last year. Last year; has it been only a year since I started going to school here? I remember it clearly, saying goodbye to my foster father, the nervous plane trip, meeting Yasui, and of course my roommate Osman with the funny eyes. At that time I thought I finally knew myself. After 13 years of feeling I had never fit in before, finally I had discovered my true nature. I was Dean Chesterfield, an artificer from my mother’s side and a decedent of Cain from my father’s. Now I feel I am right back where I started, and I can’t help wondering what happened.

The biggest source of my confusion is, of course, the return of my real parents. That they loved me wasn’t the issue. They loved me enough as a tiny baby to make a deal with a devil to save my life. Of course, they didn’t realize that devil was the cause of my condition, and thus became his servants for the last thirteen years unnecessarily. If they’d just killed him instead of making that deal my future would have been very different, but they couldn’t have known. I didn’t blame them for it, how could I? They did what they felt was the only thing they could do, after everything else they had tried, failed. After learning their story my friends and I rescued them in early March of this year, right before the end of school. It was a

flurry of activity after that, as they were whisked off to a hospital before we hardly introduced ourselves. Tests were run, seers looked them over, psychologists talked to them for hours; I could hardly see them, with doctors always hovering around and finals coming up I needed to study for.

My grades, incidentally, weren't stellar, at least in the more traditional courses like history and math. On the other hand, my teacher didn't have a high enough grade to give me in ability focused studies when I showed him all the talismans I had made over the course of the year. My father, Edmond Chesterfield, chuckled and said I took after my mother, Barbara, who said the same thing when I showed her I could levitate objects, call out my spirit projection, create spirit clones and all the rest. I had rescued them and was proving to be excellent at using my powers, which is all the school really cared about. Oh, if I had flunked out of everything else there would have been trouble, make no mistake. Reality was, roughly zero percent of the population was born with powers every year. Two hundred out of 134 million, to be roughly exact. While the school gave lip service to wanting us to have a "rounded education," in reality our future as protectors of the world was assured. When you were facing down a couple of demons it didn't matter if you knew when World War Two started or why, it mattered if you could survive the encounter.

When they were finally released from the hospital they had reams of paper detailing what they should and should not eat, exercises to do to regain loss muscle mass, psychologists to call if they felt depressed. They then had a difficult choice to make, regarding our family. Donald, that's my step-father, had sold their house and most of their stuff years ago, and put the rest into storage. At this point they basically had the world to choose from as to where they should go to settle down. It was at this point the Foundation stepped up with a very generous offer- namely, go to work for them and live on Demongate Island for basically nothing. I guess they still needed a lot more members, as most people who worked there died a couple of years ago in the whole Charna mess, and they had yet to fill all available positions. Apparently they were having a hard time finding people who wanted to work there, even today, so they needed people desperately. My parents accepted, and they moved here to Porta, a couple of miles from the school on the north-west side of the inland. I was given the choice to move in with them or stay with Donald.

It was a very difficult choice in the end, with a lot of factors to think about, as you might imagine. I didn't know these people who were my parents, as Donald had raised me practically my whole life. I wanted to get to

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know my real parents, of course, but was me saying “Well, I rescued my folks, thanks for everything Donald, see you.” really fair to him? He had watched me grow up, and in a very real sense I was his son, not Edmond’s. Staying near the school meant I could take some summer classes and continue pushing my skills, which I was very interested in doing. In the end it was Donald himself that made my decision easier. As he expected, the sale of the pocket watch he had taken from the dragon’s hoard netted him several million dollars. So he decided to close his shop for a while and tour the world.

“I don’t want you to feel guilty about ‘leaving’ me or anything like that,” he had said to me. “I’m your past now, and you would be far better served learning the limits of your abilities at Demongate. That’s your future. Remember what I said to you when you unboxed your egg? I’m even more convinced of it now; you’re going to be one of the greatest people this world has ever known, and I’m proud to have been the one who raised you.”

So I decided to live with them, and all my stuff was moved to my new home on the island. They bought all new stuff, and my parents and I started to get to know each other. I have to admit, it was a little funny how clueless they were. After all, they went from being parents to slaves, and now they were back to being parents again, but I was mostly grown up. They had long been away from the world, chained to a table and forced to make things for the devil that “owned” them. Now that they were free they were kind of at loose ends. I often found them just staring out at the ocean or crying out in their sleep. I knew they were trying to be strong for me, but they had a lot of issues to work out between themselves. Of course technology had left them behind a bit as well, they were amazed at what computers could do now! The Foundation set them up with a nice lab, where they got to work making things for operatives in the field. At least now it was for our side, and they were getting paid for it, rather than being beaten.

I too saw some psychologists, but mainly to help me understand what they were going through and to know what to expect from them. I was told it would be a long recovery for them, and helping them get into a routine and back to normal life would be key, which I did my best to help with. In one sense I felt it wasn’t fair, as my parents they should be taking care of me, not the other way around. I did understand they had been through a lot so I needed to be patient with them. Our true coming together as a family would be gradual and a long time in coming, if it came at all. I was willing to try my best and my parents seemed to want to get to know the person I had become, so I was hopeful for the future.

It still left me puzzled though, I had never had a mother before, that I remembered. How was I supposed to act around her? The same being true with my father; I was Donald's son, not Edmond's, and I had picked up Donald's habits growing up rather than my real father's, and that bothered me a little. Should I try to act more like them? Would they not love me as much if I didn't do things "their way?" I also wondered if I should stay with them instead of moving into the dorms, but I was told it was probably best to do both. I could visit them, stay some weekends, but live at the school the majority of the time. It was within walking distance, after all, so it made sense to give them some space now that they were a bit more settled. They had been filling orders for things and seemed a lot more focused these past few weeks, so I wasn't too worried about them. I looked at the clock- it was about time for the plane to be landing, and I couldn't wait to see my friends again. I jumped off the bed and started downstairs. I couldn't help but smile as I said my goodbyes and ran down to the airfield, eager to hear how my friend's summer had gone.

There were many other students and a couple of teachers crowded around the so called airport waiting for the plane to land when I arrived. I knew most of the kids, as they either lived on the island or were taking summer classes like I was, so I said hello and made small talk while we waited. Right on time, the plane appeared in the sky and got bigger and bigger, finally landing and taxiing down the runway. I watched as students poured out of the door and greet people they knew, and I didn't have to wait long to see my three friends leave the plane and waved them over to me.

Yasui ran over and hugged me, and Osman shook my hand, both were obviously glad to see me. Christina was nearby and said hello, but looked like she thought all of this was a waste of time. I'm sure I was grinning widely as I asked about their vacation, and they told me what they had been doing.

"You actually took more classes? You're allowed to have fun, you know, that's why they call it a 'summer vacation.'" Yasui teased.

"The classes I took were fun!" I protested. "I learned how to use spirit sense and improved my talisman making. I haven't made anything new, but of course I have lots of ideas for stuff."

They all rolled their eyes. "Still obsessed with talismans, then?" asked Osman.

"They're what I do best," I replied.

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“I hope so,” he continued, “I have something to ask you later, once we get settled in.”

“Sure. And how’s Katrina, my favorite spirit girl, doing these days?” I asked, looking at Osman.

A tiny figure shimmered into existence beside him, complete with little wings and trailing sparkly dust, a fairy. “Oh, his belief in me has saved my life,” the fairy said, zooming around my head. “Thank you, kind boy!”

I laughed. “So you’re a fairy now, Kat?”

“Why not?” she answered, hovering in front of me and spinning slowly in place. “My *Illusions* can be anything, why not something fun?”

“Hey, I don’t mind.” I quickly said. “I think it’s a good look for you.”

She blushed, looking down and pointing one toe, drawing a line in the sand that appeared beneath her. “Thanks. Glad you had a good summer,” then she shimmered and was gone again.

“She was always talking about you and wondering what you were up to,” said Osman. “She’s been waiting to show you her fairy form for weeks now.”

“Nice to see her having some fun with her powers. Say, is your English better, Osman?”

“Kat’s been drilling me over the summer, and she’ll only talk to me in English now, so I’ve gotten better.”

“It sounds it. Let’s get you guys unpacked. I’ll be happy to help you all with your luggage if you want. Spirit clone!” I shouted, not putting in any extra effort. I still got two, and they both went over to get luggage and help carry it to the bus that arrived to take us all to school. Not to be outdone, Yasui did the same and also got two, and between the eight of us we got everything carried onto the bus in one trip. We got some strange looks and double takes, as three of the same people twice walked onto the bus and sat down. This being Demongate High, no one really made a fuss. Those destined for the role of Prefect or Head of the dorms glared a little longer, the use of powers outside the classroom being technically forbidden. We weren’t showing off or endangering ourselves or others, and most everyone knew me because of my taking varied ability focused studies classes, so they let it slide.

Like last year there were several days before classes start, giving students time to learn the school again and get used to being away from home. I planned to put some time in on some talisman projects I had in mind, just in case I needed them later. The next day, however, Osman came to me with a request that put those plans on hold.

What we do for friends

What have you done for me lately?

After breakfast the next morning, Osman asked if I had time to discuss that thing he had mentioned earlier. I told him sure, so we went back to our dorm and sat down.

“I’m sorry to ask you this when we’ve just come back, but I don’t know how long it will take, you know? I want you to make me something.”

“Sure thing Osman, I’d be happy to! What sort of thing are we talking about here and how much are you willing to spend on it?”

Osman seemed hesitant. “I want you to make me,” he paused, wringing his hands. “Make me...”

“Yes?”

“An ultimate weapon.”

“Oh my!” I said, eyeing him. He was looking away. “But could I really live with myself if I made you *a very small bomb* that linked all suns through hyperspace? I mean, I live in this universe, you know; blowing it up would seriously inconvenience me.”

He looked at me like I had gone crazy. “What are you talking about?”

I sighed. “I keep forgetting you probably haven’t read the same books as I have. Just what exactly do you want me to make?”

He looked away again. “Remember last year, when we went to rescue your parents?”

“It does stick out in my mind, yes.”

“Then you remember how useless I was in that battle.”

“You passed out the wards, that was useful!” *I know he couldn’t petition anything because of where we were, is he upset about not “contributing?”*

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“But the battle would have been won without them,” he countered. “If I had been able to actually fight at that time, it probably would have ended sooner. It was lucky that devil was as unprepared as he was, it could have gone much worse.”

“I agree, but we got through it. Honestly, how many times are you going to be fighting in the Demon World? I’d guess never again. Anywhere else you can just petition an angel or angels to fight for you, right?”

Osman looked even more crestfallen, if that was possible. “I-” he started. “I can’t.”

“Heaven took away your powers? Why?” I was aghast, this was serious!

He looked up sharply. “No, no it’s nothing like that.” He stared at the floor again. “I just-”

Katrina appeared in her new fairy form, sitting prettily on his shoulder. “He’s trying to figure out a way to not blame me,” she said, “but let’s both be honest here, Osman. It’s my fault, and hiding that won’t make anything better.”

“Your fault?” I asked, shocked. “But you’re just a spirit, how can anything be your fault?”

“It’s because I’m not an angel,” she said sadly.

“Okay, you both better start at the beginning.”

Katrina took a deep “breath” and looked over at me. “Fair enough. The truth is, Osman is terrified of using his power outside the classroom because, like you said, at any time Heaven could take that power away from him. Imagine if some stranger at the Foundation could monitor every little use of your power, and if they didn’t like what you were doing with it, zip, they took it away from you. Now normally a petitioner has an angel to guide them and tell them when it’s appropriate to petition someone and when it’s not. Osman, on the other hand, only has me. While I have the knowledge of the angel so I know how to speak English and what different types of demons there are and things, I don’t know Heaven’s will. What if I give him wrong advice, and it’s my fault he loses his powers? That would be terrible!”

I thought for a moment. “I agree, but surely some allowance would be made for the fact you aren’t an angel?”

“Is it worth taking that risk?”

“I... I take it you haven’t spoken to any teachers, or your parents, about this concern?”

“It’s kind of embarrassing,” mumbled Osman.

“Plus, there’s never been a petitioner without an angel before now, that we know of. So how could a teacher give advice about our situation?”

“I guess that’s between you two, but now is the time to work this sort of thing out, you know, before you graduate and have to make bigger decisions. Wow. I did wonder why I never saw you petition something, I guess now I know. I’m sorry you had to carry this kind of burden on your own.”

“Oh, there are other reasons,” said Katrina, looking over at Osman. “We may as well tell him.”

Osman nodded, sadly.

“Two other reasons, to be exact,” she went on. “The first has to do with how hard angels are to actually call down. Take calling upon Haniel for example: using no extra energy and not lengthening the ten minute ritual, Osman has a one in three chance of actually succeeding. That means for every half hour of Petitioning he might get lucky one time. So he either has to spend an hour and a little extra energy, or take the normal time and spend about a third of his total energy. We figured it out because in class one day we petitioned Haniel three times before Osman was exhausted and couldn’t do it anymore.”

“But you’ll get better at it, right?”

Osman shook his head. “My teacher says I’m almost as good as he is at petitioning. I’ve studied so hard to try and make up for my... lack... But it turns out that won’t help at all. So I’m stuck.”

“Oh. Is Haniel particularly hard to call?”

“Actually he’s slightly harder because we know him personally. Getting a random angel seems to be easier than asking for a specific one, for some reason. You would almost think it should be the other way around.”

“Oh, again.”

“So that’s the first problem- length. If we got into a fight, forget petitioning anything. By the time we finished, the fight would be long over. The second problem goes along with the first. Instead of an angel protecting Osman, I am, and ESPer abilities take a huge amount of energy. Remember how tired Osman was after that fight to free your parents?”

I nodded.

“While you and Christina and Albert and everyone were hardly winded. That hermit demon we met said the same thing, Osman just has no energy compared to everyone else. If he petitions something in battle it’ll wipe him out, and that leaves me no energy to defend him with!”

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“Your powers did come in handy, I remember watching those devils get tossed around, they were so surprised!”

Osman chuckled. “Yeah, she did more than I did in that fight.”

I got up and paced back and forth a little, thinking. “So you’re worried you’ll be in a similar situation, or get caught on your own somewhere, and run out of energy and be helpless?”

“That’s right.”

“You must have other abilities though.”

“The only ability I have not directly related to petitioning is prayer, but my teacher says I need to basically master petitioning and transcending in order to learn it. So basically, no.”

“Well that’s a problem,” I said, spinning to face them. “Lucky for you guys, you came to the right person. So what’ll it be? A sword made of fire, called out from a ring on your finger? A whip made of electricity? A spear that can talk to you and fight for you and warn you of danger? Whatever you want, if I can make it for you, I will make it for you, no problem.”

Osman smiled at me. “Thanks Dean.”

“You’re the best,” echoed Katrina.

“No close weapons though. Remember what Christina said last year? Why be right next to the thing trying to kill you, if you can help it?” said Osman.

I got out a sheet of paper and wrote “Osman’s Weapon” at the top. Then a few lines down I wrote “used from range.”

“Also,” he said, “I’d love it if it somehow took advantage of my eyes. I can see great distances, after all.”

I nodded and noted down “Accurate at long distances.”

“Your energy is low, so it has to be super efficient or have some way of recharging itself, or use some kind of ammo.”

They both nodded. I added “rechargeable/ammo?” to the list.

“I want to carry it everywhere,” said Osman, “So I’d like it to be small if possible.”

I added “Travel Size,” then crossed it out and wrote “Fun Sized” instead. They both laughed.

I looked at the list. “The trouble is, I could easily make you a glove or something that gives you the ability to use elemental attack, the principal himself has one, I think. That would drain a little energy each time you activated it though.”

“I’ve seen elemental attack before, isn’t it kind of slow?”

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“Yeah, it only goes as fast as the person generating it can throw, so unless you’re right on top of the thing you’re blasting...” I noted down “can’t dodge” on the list.

We all studied the list a moment. “This really will be an ultimate weapon,” I said at last. “You’re talking about a blaster out of Star Wars here, you know that right?”

“Can it be done?”

“I shall make it, or die, my master.”

We both laughed a little, then sobered. “Seriously, can you do it?”

I took a deep breath. “No. Sorry.” *If only we got pistol training...*

“What?”

“Look, I want to, and I’m pretty sure everything on this list is achievable, but only as individual items. Let me explain.” I took out my ghost shaped talisman and the tiny sword talisman and set them on the desk by the bed. “Take this one first,” I said, pointing to the ghost one. “Took me practically no time at all, and why? Okay, I cheated, technically, but let’s not dwell on that. The main reason this kind of talisman is easier to make is because it uses my natural energy to activate. Of course I’m a fantastic talisman maker, not to brag, which helped. Now take the other one.” I held up the sword. “Not accounting for the time it took me to work out the formula for actually making it, it still took me a month of solid work to construct, you saw how many hours I poured into it, right? It’s the very same reason; this item doesn’t take energy to activate, it’s always activated. That means when making it, I had to bind a bunch of energy into it, apart from what it “stole” to create the effect of four ley lines, and even I can’t get something for nothing. It comes down to this- making energy based items is half as difficult as making permanent items. Now you want me to make you a ray gun of some kind, and as this whole thing is being talked about because you have low energy, Osman, it will all have to be made permanent. But there’s another snag you don’t know about.”

“It figures.”

“I know. Basically, the more power I force into an object, the longer and harder I have to work to force other powers in too.” I grabbed a sheet of paper and started scribbling. “Just as a rough estimate, working eight hours a day on this, no time off...” I calculated some stuff. “Figure three months at best. Working only two hours, about the amount of free time I have, it would take me an entire year!”

“So that’s out then,” he said sadly.

I nodded. “Don’t get me wrong, this is a fantastic idea, and I want to make part of it for myself, honestly, but putting all these powers into one

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object just isn't practical. That's why inheritor items are so rare, and can only do a handful of things. Take Yasui's boots, out of the hundreds of kids here, she's the only one with a pair of boots that can let her jump really high and improve her speed. Swords can harm invulnerable things and are maybe a little sharper than normal, and if you're lucky they'll catch something on fire or have some other effect, but that's it. I'm still happy to make you something. We're going to have to find you a talisman I can make that will let you fight if you need to, but only has one or two things it can do. I have something in mind, but I'm going to have to get a book from the library to see if it's practical."

"Well, it's just an idea, you don't have to do it now."

"Of course I do!" I countered. "Spirit clone!" I shouted.

Two of me appeared in the room with Osman, and I pointed to one and said "You. Albert." He nodded, and both of them took off.

"What was that all about?" asked Katrina.

"I sent one of myself to get Albert, this idea that's struck me is now burning my mind alive and I must know if it can be done. The other me is heading to the library. I tell you, doing chores at home with spirit clones is the only way to go."

They both looked at me darkly.

"What? I have powers and by goodness I'm going to use them. I'm sorry you're afraid of yours, and you have every reason to be, but don't expect me to not exploit every advantage I've been given."

Osman sighed. "I know, I should not be jealous. The power I have been given is an important one, and once out of school I can work at a place with other petitioners who can guide me in proper application of it."

"I really think you should be talking to a councilor or teacher or someone other than me about this," I said. "If they don't know something is wrong, they can't help you fix it."

"I will," he resolved. "But no matter what, that won't solve the problem of my energy being so low, or needing Kat to protect me."

"True, but maybe I could make you a talisman like my shirt, that acted as armor. Then you wouldn't need so much protecting."

He nodded. "Yes, that's a good idea too, I'll keep it in mind."

"Good. Let's wait for me to get back and we'll see if what I have in mind will work."

Albert arrived a moment later with a quizzical look on his face. "This is all very weird," he said, looking at the two Deans in the room.

“Didn’t I tell you I was twins?” I joked.

“I’m the better looking one,” said my clone.

“It’s just something he can do,” said Osman. “Nice to see you again, Albert. How was your summer?”

“It was very nice, for a change. The world didn’t end nor was there the threat of the world ending, so it actually was quite peaceful. I even saw my brother, and he didn’t overtly try to kill me, which was a nice change.”

“This all happens to you often?”

“More than I would like to admit. So, what can I do for... both of you?”

“Just had a quick alchemy question for you, sparked by my discussion here with Osman about a possible weapon for him.”

“Shoot.”

“Can you make me something, like a crystal, that can hold energy? I’m talking about a lot of it. Possibly even a bizarrely huge amount.”

He considered a moment. “It’s not something I would usually make, so I can’t say I know off the top of my head.”

“Is there a book you could look in?”

He nodded, and told me a title.

I gestured to my spirit clone, who nodded to me and disappeared. Albert jumped.

“Did you learn *Teleportation*?”

“What? Oh, no, I just released the technique that created him. As all the knowledge he accumulated went into me, and I have another clone at the library, that clone now knows to get that book you asked for as well as the one I wanted.”

Albert looked at Osman with a sort of “is this guy for real” look.

“It’s okay, he learned the technique from Yasui, it’s some kind of true martial artist thing.”

“How is Yasui anyway?”

“Doing well, I’m sure she’ll be around soon, you two can catch up.”

“Good, good. Incidentally, can you learn to teleport?” asked Albert, a dangerous gleam in his eye.

I frowned, then walked over to my pouch and took out a binder. “Let’s see here...” I said, paging through it. “Teleportation is actually very hard, not even all ESPer teachers here can do it. I think I remember seeing— Ah, here we are, yes, I could learn to call the spirit of the hummingbird, which would allow anyone I asked it to assist to teleport. Did you have a destination in mind?”

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“Yes. I’m running low on bloodiron but I know where there’s tons of it, if I could just get back there. I was thinking, in exchange for making you this crystal or whatever, could you help me get more and bring it back here?”

“Absolutely!” I said. “I’ll have to ask it to give you the skill, as you’ve been there and I haven’t. I’ll need a few days to master the ritual, but I do have to warn you, you won’t be great at it. Now I can give some people the spirit of the ant like I did when we first petitioned Haniel, so they could help you out, but don’t blame me if we only make it half way there.”

“I’m sure it won’t be an issue. I’m certain I can make up some Ameliorating Medicament to help me out.”

“It’s settled then! Given you can actually help me out- heck, even if you can’t I don’t mind helping out a friend.”

“Thanks.”

A few minutes later my other clone was back from the library and Albert took his book and I took mine. We both flipped through in silence for a while and Albert suddenly grinned.

“Yes,” he said, “There is a crystal I can cook up that can absorb energy.”

“Great! What’s the catch? I know there’s a catch.”

“You want it to absorb a ridiculous amount of energy, that’s the catch. The amount of energy it can hold depends on the size of the crystal that’s made, so your normal tiny charms aren’t going to cut it for this one.”

“I see. So it would be more like an amulet than a charm, is what you’re telling me?”

“The crystal itself would have to be at least as big as a baseball to do what you want.”

“Could it be reshaped?”

He shrugged. “I don’t see why I couldn’t use transmogrification to reshape it.”

“Okay, so it could technically be made in the shape of something, then just covered with bloodiron to keep it from being cracked. After all, if we’re going after bloodiron anyway... I could make the crystal into a talisman that drains a tiny bit of energy every hour, not enough to even notice. Then I make a lump of bloodiron into a talisman that lets me use energy like a spirit energist to pull it out. You put them together into a fancy shape and it’s done!”

“I think that could work just fine.”

“But how does any of this help me?” protested Osman.

“Oh, I’m still looking into stuff for you,” I answered. “This crystal and your idea have broadened your options though.”

“How so?”

“Well first, don’t forget I can make talismans that help us use our powers better, or maybe I never talked to you about that? Maybe it was Albert?” I looked over at him, and he shrugged. It was a while ago. “Anyway, I could make you a talisman that helped you petition so you wouldn’t have to use that extra energy.”

“Which brings us back to the problem of not knowing Heaven’s will.”

“Right, but there is a second option; If I get this energy crystal system working, you can have my Tyrfinng talisman.”

“You mean it? You were just saying how long it took you to make!”

“I know, but it looks like you need it more than I do. Also I have a lot more energy than you do, so in theory I would build it up in this crystal faster than you, too. It seems to me this will actually work out better for me, using that talisman means I have to spend as much energy of my own as I get from the fake ley lines it provides. Using this new one I’m considering is better, because I’m just storing my own energy and then getting it back- thus I can use as much or as little as I wanted to at any one time. See how that works?”

“That would be a bad fit for me because of how slowly my energy comes back after I use it?”

“Exactly. I don’t get tired very fast, but you getting drained of energy would make you tired all the time, or be too slow to be useful. Remember last year in health class when we talked about this? It’s been determined you get back about 5% of your energy per hour, so making this talisman drain half that much out of someone would hardly be noticed, as it would even out in the end. But 5% of my energy is a lot more than 5% of yours.”

“So using your talisman helps a little, but I still have low energy. If I have to use the same amount I get from the talisman, that means I would hardly double my energy!”

“I know, it’s sort of an odd situation, but it’s all I can offer you. People with a lot of energy, like me, gain only a little benefit when using ley lines, because they’re going to spend more of their own energy and only a little ley line energy. People like you with low energy, who need it most, don’t get the benefit because they just don’t have it to spend in the first

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place. Does that make sense? Whoever set the whole thing up had a weird sense of humor, I think.”

“I think that would be The All-Father,” said Osman.

“I rest my case.”

He glared at me.

“It’s like only going to the bank when you need money. If you have money, and don’t need it, banks will fall all over themselves to lend you more. But if you actually need it, they don’t even want to talk to you.”

“You’re right. What makes one person have more energy anyway?”

“What makes one girl more beautiful than another?”

“Ah, I see your point. Anyway, Osman, you can start learning spirit sense this year, and find real ley lines to use too, further stretching your energy. If you were just hiding somewhere, petitioning, it would be okay. Most people can’t use them in battle because they have to move around, losing them. You don’t have that problem.”

He looked thoughtful. “I still would like a weapon of some kind.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure about what I was thinking of before. Oh, I found it alright, I just don’t know how practical it would be.” Osman stared at me quizzically. “There’s a talisman I can make that just releases a devastating burst of power, enough to take out, well, let’s leave it at a house. My thought was, ask a holy chosen to help me and it’ll release holy power. That way it would only harm demons and the like, rather than property. However it would either be always active or you would have to activate it with energy, and it would take a lot of energy to activate. Not so bad if you hooked into the other talisman beforehand, but still, we’re right back where we started.”

“Some sort of close combat weapon.”

“Maybe. I think I could scale it down a little, you don’t need to be destroying any houses in the future I hope. So what about being able to snap your fingers, spend a little energy, and engulf someone in fire? That could be useful, and hard to dodge because they wouldn’t see it coming.”

“Yeah, I like that!”

“Now back to the weapon idea, I’ve not had a chance to do this yet, but it’s a really great use of something I can do- I could make whatever you decide on into a tattoo. Put it on your hand and you could conjure a weapon or a burst of an element. In this case I don’t recommend holy power, just in case you were fighting something other than a demon, though it would be more effective against demons. Sort of like using a weapon blessed by a holy chosen, it would be totally useless against regular people.”

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“At the very least it couldn’t be taken away from me.”

“If someone cut your hand where the tattoo was, the power would be gone, so even that’s not exactly true.”

“Well, let me think about it, if you come across anything else let me know. Once you come back from getting the blood metal and have your new toy made I’ll decide.”

“Whatever you want, Osman. Why don’t I get started making the diagrams for the energy talisman,” I nodded to my spirit clone who was still hanging around, “while I go find someone that can teach me the hummingbird spirit?”

Osman and Albert both just shook their heads and sighed.

The Tree of Life

Rise, my creation, and live!

Several days later Albert and I stood in the principal's office, getting permission for our journey to collect bloodiron. The office itself was much as I remembered it, with the heavy wooden desk, uncomfortable chairs in front, and paperwork strewn everywhere. Dim sunlight came in through the windows as the day was overcast, so the harsh florescent lights above illuminated us. Mr DeLefeu sat, staring at us, and I resisted the urge to fidget. Below, back in the dorms, two spirit clones were working on both parts of my new talisman, though I didn't expect even the lesser one to be done in less than four days.

I really need to get or make Yasui something nice for teaching me this technique, I thought. Being able to multi-task on this sort of tedious work is very nice.

"Well, I suppose the stuff is useful," said Mr DeLefeu, "and it's not like going to the Demon World, there's no danger there. How exactly are you going to get there again?"

"I'll call on the spirit of the ant for myself and anyone else who's going, if I can manage it. Then I'll call hummingbird for Albert to do the actual teleport. We'll assist him, and should get there no problem."

"You'll have to picture yourself there, can you do that?"

"We've been practicing since Dean learned it, and the place I'm going, let's just say I won't forget it, so picturing myself there is not going to be a problem."

"How much are you thinking of bringing back?"

I pointed to my ever present pouch, hanging on a belt loop. "With this, as much as we can get in a couple of hours."

“Naturally,” said Albert, hastily, “I’ll donate a sizable portion to the school for other Alchemists to experiment with.”

“I suppose it is just pipes,” he said at last. “So it won’t come to life and start attacking people like that last chunk of the stuff you brought here did.” Albert looked uncomfortable. “All right, I’ll have Mrs Darrington go with you, she’s the best at teleportation in the school, she can bring you back here if you get into trouble. Also once she’s seen it, she can go there herself if we need her to. You’ll go this Saturday then?”

We both nodded. “Fine, I’ll let her know.”

“Thank you very much,” we both said. “Where shall we meet her?”

“I’ll tell her the front of the school, ten o’clock Saturday morning? How’s that sound?”

Albert and I looked at each other and nodded.

“That sounds good to us.” he said.

“Have fun.”

“So why won’t you tell me where, exactly, we’re going?” I asked as we walked away from the office.

“Oh, I can’t describe it, I want you to see it for the first time with unassuming eyes.”

“Okay,” I said, unconvinced. “Now what’s this about something coming to life?”

“Don’t remind me,” he groaned. “See, demons can make a very perverse machine like construct out of bloodiron and a human soul. Kind of this evil, soul powered robot bent on destruction. The old gang I hung out with tangled with a few of them, that’s where I got most of my bloodiron from in the first place. I brought one back that was mostly intact to study it, and it reanimated somehow. Shoot, I forget exactly how, you know that? Someone was controlling it remotely I think? Anyway, I learned my lesson there, no big pieces of those things.”

“What are they called?”

“Vessels, we called them.”

“That makes sense. How do you fight them?”

“I’ll tell you one thing; If you manage to kill one, run away, as they explode pretty violently when they die. If you know some skill that can pull the soul that’s animating it out, go for that. Otherwise, just blast it or run away. They can do energy blasts too, but they’re kind of slow, so try to stay behind them.”

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“Good advice for fighting anything. What’s one look like?”

“A floating chunk of metal with blades for arms and legs.”

“Distinctive.”

“I found it so too.”

We walked in silence a moment.

“We’ll have to meet down in the summoning rooms at, say, nine thirty on Saturday, to give me time to build a fire and call on the spirits.”

“Not a problem.”

“Do you have your... potion ready?”

“It’ll be done, don’t worry. I’m making your crystal too, so it should be done in a few days as well.”

“I love it when a plan comes together.”

The next day classes started, and I was able to take three electives this year, so I stayed in my spirit sense class so I could get better at that. I also took up aura reading, and another class of ability focused studies so I could get even better at talisman making, or pick up things that caught my eye. My artificer teacher said I had far surpassed him at making talismans, which made me smile a bit. I still felt I could become better at it. My goal was still to become the greatest talisman maker of all time, and it seemed I was well on my way. My more mundane classes included health again, math of course, ancient history, life science and the combined demonology and angelology. Naturally I was looking forward to some more than others, but I didn’t let that stop me from being a little excited about being back in classes again. They passed as normal, and I finally got to learn a little about various demons and angels. I was especially interested in angels, so that I could see what sort of beings Osman might be dealing with if he ever petitioned something.

The week passed, and finally it was time to get that bloodiron for Albert. Our little group went down to the summoning rooms again and I lit another fire, calling on the spirits of ant and hummingbird for several minutes. I called each for three minutes, leaving us a half hour to get there, which I figured would be plenty of time. I managed to call the spirit well enough that I was able to give Yasui and myself the ability to help others, so I felt we were in good shape. Katrina put out the fire, and we walked out to the front of the school to meet Mrs Darrington. Along the way, Albert changed into his so called “battle form,” a large man shaped dragon, which he claimed was stronger. He had the fake Tyrfing with him, which he explained he would draw on so he would have the strength to carry us all for

the instant it would take to teleport us to our destination. We met Mrs Darlington and said hello, then all grabbed onto Albert to make the trip. He concentrated, picturing himself at his destination, which was required by anything that wanted to teleport and Yasui and I both offered some suggestions that popped into our heads. He nodded.

“Here we go!” he said, and again, we both made some suggestions as he closed his eyes and drew energy, ready to lift us. A blink of an eye, and we were there.

To say the tree I saw when next I blinked was large would be a bit like saying the sun is far away from the Earth, or that the oceans are pretty deep. The words are there, but their meaning cannot be conveyed so simply. From where we were standing the trunk of the tree seemed to be inside the center of a mountain, hollowed out so as not to be seen from above. We stood on an island, at the water’s edge, peering through a passageway of stone that led straight to the trunk, which seemed to invite us to come closer and experience true life. I could only see a small bit of the trunk, but I knew deep in my heart there was only one tree that could look like that.

“This is it,” I said in awe. “That tree you were talking about with Haniel. The one you helped him out with.”

“That’s right. He should be around here, someplace, actually. Something’s wrong though,” he said, concerned. “I wanted to be almost beneath it, we’re out here instead.” He looked around, trying to see if anything was disturbed, but as far as I could see, nothing looked amiss. There was a forest of lesser trees dotting the island, and high above us rose the stone of the mountain. The only sound was the gentle lapping of the waves upon the shore, as no birds wheeled and called in this remote place. “I suppose it could be something left over,” he finally said. “Could you check it out, Osman? See if there’s anything odd about this place right now? And look for an angel or two hanging about the trunk, okay?”

“Not a problem,” Osman replied. “The first odd thing I notice is this dead guy here.”

“What?” we all shouted.

We all looked down and saw he was right, there was a waterlogged body inches away from where we had landed, and it looked like it had been there for some time.

“We were all looking at the tree, so we didn’t notice,” said Yasui, backing away a step. “Uhg, what happened to him?”

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“Why don’t we ask him?” asked Mrs Darrington.

“Because he’s *dead*?” answered Christina hotly.

“Come now, my dear, certainly you know by now where we are. We’ll just take him under the tree and he’ll be fine.” The body lifted out of the water, dripping and threatening to come apart, making most of us look away. “Off we go.”

She started in towards the tree, and we had no choice but to follow her through the tunnel, which wasn’t long, and opened up to reveal the entire tree inside. Standing roughly half a mile from the actual trunk as we were, the branches still nearly reached us, spreading high overhead, seemingly longer than the space inside would allow. The leaves sparkled like jewels, even at this distance I could tell that each was perfectly formed, flawless and vibrant with life. No breeze rustled the leaves, and I could feel the power and health radiating outwards from this place. No sooner had we gotten under the leaves when the body began to change, becoming healthy and whole again, and it gently floated to the ground. It only took a moment, but color came back to the skin and it started breathing, making everyone but Albert and Mrs Darrington back away. It took a deep breath, no *he* took a deep breath, and opened his eyes, coming back to life again as we watched.

“What happened?” said the man, looking around confused. “Who are you?”

“I’m Hannah Darrington, a teacher at Demongate High, and these are some students on a bit of a field trip with me. Now may I ask who you are?”

“Zachary Stebbins, at your service. I’m assigned clean up duty here with my partner Aaron, I work for the Foundation.”

“Clean up?” asked Yasui.

“Getting rid of the bloodiron pipes running down into the tree roots from that weird collection center up above.”

“Just two of you?” exclaimed Albert. “That job would take a year!”

“You’re telling me, you know how hard this stuff is to work on?”

“So what happened?” Mrs Darrington asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Zachary said, looking around. “Where did you find me?”

We all looked at each other. Mrs Darrington finally said, “I’m afraid to inform you, we found you dead out on the beach.”

He sighed. “I was kind of afraid of that. I guess he did betray me, after all.”

“But you’re alive again, that’s amazing!” said Yasui.

He sadly shook his head. “No, I’m still dead. Oh, I can talk and everything, but right now the only thing keeping me here is the power of the world tree. If I ever left I would die again almost immediately. So I’m stuck here forever, I guess.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Sure, but at least I get to finish the work.” Of course even he didn’t sound totally convinced.

We stared at him, unbelieving.

“Well you can feel it, can’t you? The energy of this place, the peace of being beneath the sacred branches? Can’t really feel bad here, and it’s a nice enough place, really. There are worse places to spend eternity, believe me.”

“I’ve seen them, so I do believe you.”

“Guess I’ll get to it then, thanks for bringing me here, so I could come back. If you could just let the Foundation know I’ll need another partner?”

“I think you’ve been dead a little too long, or here too long, or something,” said Christina. “Don’t you want to find out what happened? Why your partner killed you?”

“Ah, I’m sure he’s long gone. Not like I can go anywhere else, anyway. You guys are welcome to poke around all you want though.”

“Just stay here a second, I need to talk to my students before you go anywhere.”

“Fine, no rush around this place.”

She brought us out of earshot of Zachary and motioned us to be quiet.

“What’s his deal?” asked Christina sharply. “Was he dead too long or something?”

“I don’t exactly know, but look up.”

We did, the branches of the tree towered over us, and there was a faint shimmer, like looking through water, right near the bottom of the leaves. I had originally thought it was the leaves themselves shining, but looking closer it seemed to be something else.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Osman.

Mrs Darrington nodded. “One of the few remaining Earthly portals to the Heavenly Realms. Closing this one would chop the tree’s branches off, which would kill the tree. As the tree is the source of all ley lines in the world, that would effectively kill the world.”

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“So you think something happened to him?”

She shrugged. “Maybe he wasn’t too bright to begin with, that’s why he was sent here. Or it’s possible close proximity to a Heaven Portal and the tree’s energy warped his mind. We haven’t really had any means to experiment, nor would we want to,” she hastened to add. “With how few good Foundation operatives we have now, sparing two just for this effort seems wasteful. Oh, the pipes would have to be removed eventually, but only a select few know this place even exists, and only a madman would try something like gathering the tree’s sap again.”

“Someone tried to extract sap? For what, the ultimate maple syrup?”

“In a way. That’s what the pipes are for,” said Albert sadly. “Charna needed Earthly power to do what she wanted, and there’s no shortage of that here. So she was collecting sap from the tree as a kind of storage medium for it, so she could carry it around with her. The Foundation got wind of it and sent a ton of people here to stop it, including a bunch of powerful students from the school. Myself included.” Even looking like a dragon, he seemed to look more smug than usual.

“That’s why I wanted to come here to get it. Apart from the metal being free, as I can pick up as much as I want, rather than paying some demon for it. I wanted to make sure the pipes were taken care of, as I figured the Foundation wouldn’t have this as a priority. Like you said, Mrs Darrington, so few people can know about this place, and I can handle bloodiron better than anyone because I’ve worked with it so much. I’m a natural fit for getting rid of it.”

“How pro-active of you.”

“I did have an ulterior motive,” he said, looking down. “I was hoping to find some excuse to get you here, Dean. I wanted to show you this place before I graduated, so if I didn’t finish the work, you could. You needed to see it for yourself.”

“Having seen this place, I do want to protect it, you can count on that.”

“Thanks, hearing you say that makes me feel better.”

“Now, back to the matter at hand,” said Mrs Darrington. “what do we do with our new friend here, and why haven’t the angels that are supposed to be guarding this place shown up yet?”

“His behavior does seem odd,” I said, glancing over at him, “But that’s not enough to go on. He said his partner betrayed him, so we have to assume it had something to do with the tree or bloodiron. As far as angels, it is a big place, maybe they’re just far off, or they know we aren’t a threat and are letting us be. Osman, can you check the area out, see what’s going on around here?”

“Sure,” he said, nodding. He turned in a slow circle, looking around the perimeter of the cave.

“Interesting,” he said. “I see where the pipes come out, there’s a hole in the wall way over there. Then they run individually down into the roots, some of those pipes are extremely long. Looks like about half of the pipes have been cleared, I see them sitting in pieces over there. Bad news, the things clearing them now seem to be demons. There’s a guy sitting underneath the tree, on the other side from us, reading something. His power is active, he must be a summoner, probably the one keeping them here.” He faced us again- “That’s what I see.”

“What do the demons look like?” asked Mrs Darrington.

“Black wings, long noses, they’re breathing fire on the pipes, probably to cut them and make them easier to move.”

“Tengu,” she said angrily. “Greedy, but not too greedy. Probably happy to do the work for a cut of the profits. I’m guessing there’s ten of them?”

Osman nodded.

“Figures, that’s the most one person can sustain, they’re pretty easy. I guess we better go back and report this. Sorry Albert, I guess your mission to get this metal will have to be postponed until we clean these demons out of here. The good news is at least they’re doing the hard work for us!”

“No,” I said strongly. “We can’t leave. We put all this effort into getting here, and you want someone else to swoop in and take over? The fewer people that have seen this place the better, right? We’re here, we’re powerful, let’s take this guy ourselves.”

Capture

“It’s not about speed, it’s about wit, brains and cunning.”

“I was praying it wouldn’t come to that sir.”

-- Lister and Kryten from Red Dwarf

“While I appreciate your enthusiasm,” Mrs Darrington said dubiously, “What do you think you can do? While he’s near the tree he has unlimited quantities of energy, and can’t be knocked unconscious. He can have his tengu back in an instant, or stop maintaining them and summon something else. He can’t be killed, and he could have others powers apart from summoning. It’s a huge risk.”

“We can’t die ether, though, right?” Osman argued.

She looked at him. “You’re for dealing with this ourselves as well?”

He looked thoughtful. “I think this is a clear case where petitioning would be accepted by Heaven. It’s a holy tree, there are demons here of unknown intent, and clearly this summoner intends to profit from the work his demons are doing. Lastly we know he killed his partner so he wouldn’t be seen doing it, the mark of a truly guilty man. Also it’s the only place I’ll be able to petition freely, as I’ll have unlimited energy here too.”

Ah, he wants to show he can pull his weight, I thought. I can accept that.

“I can try paralyzing him, I bet that would work here,” said Yasui. “I’m not very good at it, though.”

“I can restrain him with transmogrification,” said Albert.

“I can take care of anything he summons,” said Christina. “I’m pretty sure if I kill something in one shot it’ll go back to the Demon World rather than healing, right?”

Mrs Darrington nodded. "Okay, you kids come up with a plan, and I'll back you up if needed. I suppose it'll be a good exercise for you."

Everyone looked at me. "Right then," I said, not feeling very confident suddenly. "I think the best plan is just to go down there, let him see us, then capture him in the confusion of him summoning his demons back."

"If he doesn't see his buddy Zach, he might not even know we're onto him," suggested Christina.

"We could take him by surprise!" said Yasui.

"This all sounds good. Now Osman, you said once you knew how to petition phoenixes?" He nodded. "And if I remember my lore properly, they are immune to fire, while these demons, tengu you said, mostly attack with fire. So why don't you petition as many as you can, and they can fly over and hide a ways up the tree. When he gets his tengu here, they can swoop down and be a distraction while Yasui attacks him directly. How many can you get, by the way?"

"Four," he replied definitively.

"Okay, with the four of us, two people are going to have to handle two, but I can make some spirit clones so that's not a problem I guess."

"Are you counting me in your plan?" asked Mrs Darrington. "Remember, I'll only step in if you guys get in trouble."

"No, I'm talking about Katrina."

"Who?"

"Osman's sister. Never mind, trust me, we'll be fine."

She looked dubious. "Try not to take any blows to the head, okay? Anything that doesn't kill you instantly will be regenerated almost immediately, but if you get killed here, prepare to stay here with Zach until the end of time. Oh, and he probably won't be able to get them all back here at once, only a couple at a time. The longer the fight drags on, the worse it'll be, so capture him quickly." We nodded our understanding, and Osman got started petitioning, obviously doing it much faster than normal. He put a burst of power into it and less than a minute later had petitioned... one phoenix.

"That's it?" said Christina, pointing at the phoenix that had appeared, which was looking around interested. "You did all that and got one?"

"If I had taken more time I probably would have gotten two. I'll keep doing it until I get all four, it's still faster than trying for all four at once with the full ten minute ritual."

"Whatever," she said, turning away.

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“I’m sorry about her attitude, holy phoenix. I will explain why I’ve called you here once I petition three more of your brethren so I don’t have to repeat myself. If that’s acceptable to you?”

The phoenix nodded, and continued looking around.

Once again Osman started praying, and this time he got two, using another minute of time. Christina was tapping her foot impatiently, but Yasui was entranced by the shimmering birds, saying quietly how beautiful they were. “Only one more now, I’ll try to speed it up a little more.”

Now I realize why you were so anxious to get a weapon of your own, I thought darkly. You said your teacher praised you as being almost as good as he was, and here you can spend your maximum energy with Spirit Manipulation without concern, but you can still only manage two at a time in a minute? Now I get why petitioners have guardian angels normally, they’re helpless! I felt kind of bad for thinking like that, but I knew in my heart it was true. In a few seconds I could have several spirit clones going, each with their own spirit projection out, an armor talisman turned on, and whatever else I could come up with. In a fight against me, he wouldn’t be halfway through one petitioning before I had a small army and took him down. He couldn’t rely on his powers to protect him, no wonder he wanted something faster and more reliable.

Osman, building momentum now or something, spoke just a few words and a forth phoenix popped into existence beside the others.

Oh, he probably only tried for one, rather than multiples, I thought. Maybe he should have just done that four times, rather than trying to get them all at once. Oh well.

Osman told the four why he had petitioned them, and what we wanted them to do should the tengu be summoned back to deal with us. They all nodded and flew off without speaking.

“Don’t say much, do they?” remarked Christina.

“They speak at need,” replied Osman. “Shall we go?”

We instructed Zachary to stay here, and he agreed. “He already killed me once, I’d rather not repeat the experience, thanks. Good luck catching him.”

Just to be safe I activated my armor talisman and made two spirit clones. We marched down to the tree, Mrs Darrington and my clones staying out of sight opposite where Osman said this Arron was. As we walked around the trunk we started talking about the tree and how amazing it was, making sure that Arron could hear us. We planned to act surprised when he showed himself, he wouldn’t know Osman could see him from the entrance, and it

would keep him off guard. As expected he seemed surprised as we came near him, craning our necks to see into Heaven. He threw his book down and sprang up, concerned.

“Oh, it’s just a bunch of kids,” he said, looking us over. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, hey, there’s someone else here!” Osman finally exclaimed. We both had been waiting for Yasui or Christina to step up, but Yasui was hanging back looking shy and Christina looked like she was itching to get her bow out. “Hi! We’re on a mini field trip from Demongate, we didn’t expect to see anyone else. It sure is peaceful here, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” he said slowly. “How exactly did you get here? Boat? Are there teachers with you?”

“Nah, we sort of snuck out,” I answered. “Albert’s been here before, so we could teleport here and have a look around. He was right, this place is amazing. Is that a real portal to Heaven?” I pointed up.

“Yeah I guess,” he answered without taking his eyes off us. “So no one knows you’re here? Isn’t that a bit dangerous?”

“What could happen to us around here? We only wanted to see it for a minute, then we’ll head back.”

“No, no, stay, I’d like to hear how you saw this place before. You must have been in that big battle here a while back I guess, huh? You’re built for it. You must be some kind of cambion?”

“I’ve been told I look like that,” Albert replied. “But I’m really not.”

Huh? I thought. *Why not just agree with him? Have to ask him about that later.*

“Well, whatever, you look pretty strong. So you just appeared here? Didn’t see anything odd?”

He’s afraid, Katrina sent to us. He would feel me read his mind, but I can tell that much. I think he wants to know if we’ve seen anything odd so he’ll have to kill us, too.

“Just you,” I answered. “We didn’t expect anyone to be here, did we guys?” Everyone shook their heads. “Say,” I said thoughtfully, as if I had just thought of this. “You didn’t wind up here by accident, did you? We can take you back to the school with us, if you wanted. I’m sure that there someone can take you close to where you need to be.”

“That won’t be necessary, I have my own way of leaving. I’m actually here to... that is I was just taking a little break from... you know what? Forget it. You can identify me, I can’t have that.”

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He barked out something, and two humanish looking demons with black wings appeared, surprised. “Keep them busy,” he yelled, “While I bring the rest of them here!”

It seemed Osman, the one among us that had absolutely nothing he could do, again acted first. He made a show of dramatically raising his arms and calling “To me, my phoenixes!” while taking a step away from the rest of us. Arron scoffed, “What kind of petitioning is that, kid?”

He nearly fell over as the four birds swooped out of the air above him, making him jump back.

“You lied!” he yelled, “you had them here the whole time!” He made that same gesture again and inhaled to start summoning more of his tengu.

One of the phoenixes shot fire at him, but it was more for effect, to keep him off balance. They understood we wanted him alive. He seemed to realize this and stood his ground, but it didn’t seem to help him any when he suddenly lifted up, most likely thanks to Kat. His legs were flailing around almost comically, but that didn’t interrupt his summoning.

Three more tengu appeared in front of him, once again looking surprised to have been brought here. Yasui was already on her way over there to try and paralyze him, so she skidded to a halt in front of the closest one and lashed out with two kicks at his head, trying to kill him instantly. Though the demon tried to defend itself, her first blow caught him right in the jaw and he disappeared in a puff of smoke. Unable to stop her momentum for the second kick, it passed through empty air, making her a little off balance. The other two edged back, unsure what to do, having just seen their work buddy get slaughtered. One of the tengu there from before breathed fire in our direction, but one of the phoenixes dodged into it, dispersing it. I didn’t feel it was the time for subtlety, so I fired off an energy blast at the other tengu about to breathe on us. In my haste it went totally wild, making me think I should probably leave the energy blasts to my beaver, who seemed better at it. I got ready to call him out instead.

All three phoenixes shot fire at a different tengu, two who tried to scramble out of the way. A third tried to meet it with his own fire attack. The two were injured, but not enough to kill them, while the third expertly caught the fire attack with his own, deflecting it.

Albert rushed in, not even bothering to draw his sword, but rather relying on the dragon claws that tipped his fingers. He chose the closest one, and took a swing at it, claws extended. The tengu tried to block it, but couldn’t, and took a handful of dragon claw to the face. Sadly, as Albert drew his hand back, the tengu healed and was still there, ready to counter-attack. Christina

brought her bow up to fire, and shot a tengu at random, aiming for the face. She nicked him, and once more the wound healed immediately, leaving him standing there. Similarly, the fourth phoenix shot a stream of fire at a tengu, which barely dodged.

This isn't working, I thought. Yasui must have gotten lucky, our attacks are hitting and keeping them off balance, but we're not killing them fast enough!

"Concentrate on one at a time!" I shouted.

"Good luck with that!" shouted Zack back, as he summoned another three of his tengu demons back to himself.

"Take him out already, Yasui, what are you doing?" shouted Christina.

I tried to call out my projection, but failed miserably, and gathered my thoughts to try again. I saw why Yasui hadn't moved, she was still a bit off balance from killing that tengu. She was just now turning towards Aaron, so Albert jumped back from the one he had slashed at. He put his hands on the ground, ready to entrap him in earth as soon as Yasui hit him. Seems he had learned his lesson fighting those devils before; if they can dodge it's a problem.

Christina and all four phoenixes fired off blasts at once. This caught two different tengu in lethal energies, killing them and making them disappear. At the same time, my clones and their spirit projections rounded the tree, ready to take action.

Yasui, now recovered, slammed into Aaron with a mighty kick, making him go limp. Albert caused the very ground to erupt underneath where Aaron was floating, wrapping him up to his nose so he couldn't speak, then immediately turned it into stone.

The remaining tengu seemed to realize it was over and didn't put up too much of a fight. With coordinated strikes against each one of them, plus my two clones that had arrived with their spirit projections, we made short work of them.

Albert set about repairing the ground around the tree that had been burned, and grass immediately came back into any bare spots. Mrs Darrington stepped into view from where she had been waiting.

"Nicely done," she said, impressed. "You fought pretty well as a team."

"It wasn't our first fight like this," I replied, not very modestly.

"What's going to happen to him?" Yasui asked, as Aaron glared up at her from his stone prison.

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“Someone at the Foundation will figure out his sentence,” she answered. “I’ll take him back now.”

“Wait a moment,” said Osman, holding up a hand. He spoke to his phoenixes, and pointed, sending them off toward one of the walls.

“What did you send them to do?” asked Yasui.

“Take out the other two. I don’t know if he can sever his connection without talking. If he can’t, he could start wasting away as they drain energy from him, as he won’t get to replace it where he’s going.”

Mrs Darrington nodded. “Good thinking, Osman.”

A few moments later the phoenixes came back, and were dismissed by Osman.

“They’re taken care of, you can take him now.”

“Can you thin this stone out a little?” she asked Osman. “I’m not very strong, you know.”

He nodded and touched it, flowing some of it off until it was more like a second skin. “You can get him out when you arrive?” he asked.

“One way or the other,” she replied, grabbing him around the middle. “Be right back.”

“No!” a voice shouted, and a surprise energy blast headed straight for Arron and Mrs Darrington, thrown by Zach! Osman threw himself in the way, barely in time, and absorbed much of the blast. Christina and I both dropped the strongest barriers we could around the area, which cut the power off. Luckily Osman seemed to be okay, but it was impossible to tell if he was still really alive or if it was the tree keeping him that way.

“What are you doing?” shouted Mrs Darrington at Zach, where the energy blast had come from. He was standing there with a glowing sword in his head, and it looked like he was gathering power for another blast.

“Oh crap!” said Christina, manifesting her bow, and started drawing power herself. “He’s going to unleash a massive blast, and kill us all!”

He’s outside my range for telekinesis, Katrina sent us.

“He deserves to die,” said Zach, continuing to gather energy. “We were supposed to sell the iron together, but he betrayed me and left me to rot out in the ocean. This is the only chance I’ll have to avenge myself. I’m sorry you have to die too, but I suppose if you want to move, I’ll let you. There’s really no reason you all have to share my fate here.”

“But don’t you work for the Foundation? How can you even consider doing this?” Mrs Darrington asked, alarmed.

“I do, but he doesn’t. They could only spare me for the job, but that I could bring someone to help that I trusted.

There's so much metal here I figured a little wouldn't be missed, so I asked my buddy if he wanted to come and get some for himself. He agreed, then stabbed me in the back so he could take it all. Jerk. So are you moving or what?"

"Oh, this is ridiculous," said Albert, who suddenly disappeared, and was now standing behind Zach. He grabbed Zach around the middle and vanished again, leaving us looking around for where we went. A moment later he was back, walking through the cave entrance again. He took to the air once he got inside, and soared over to us.

"It's okay," he said. "He's gone, you can drop the barriers."

We both did, and Christina let go of the energy she was building up, making her bow vanish again.

"Where did you take him?" asked Mrs Darrington.

"Back where we found him, he died instantly. Re-died? Un-lived? Anyway, if you want me to bring him back after you leave with Arron I can, or we can just bury him someplace."

"Better bury him," she answered. "I think that would be the greater kindness than making him live here the rest of eternity with his rage. What a waste."

"I agree, the metal isn't that valuable you should kill over it, and there's plenty here for everyone."

"You're an alchemist, Albert," she said, putting a hand on his arm. "You see the material world a little differently than other people do. Maybe you'll understand one day. I'll be back soon, I'll have to make a report about all this, so I guess you can get to work now."

So we did, and a half hour later Mrs Darrington came back to check on us. After putting the pipes the tengu had previously cut up into my pouch, we started digging the pipes out that were still stuck in the roots, each in our own way. It was tough going, but we didn't get tired or anything, so we made quick work of it. Between all of us we managed to at least clear the ground of pipes in a couple of hours. We had collected quite a decent amount of the metal. More than enough, Albert said, to keep him happy for years. Mrs Darrington said an investigation would be conducted on Arron's character to see if this was just opportunity that got the best of him, or a character flaw that would need more watching. In any case he had murdered someone, which wouldn't go unpunished. Also someone new would be sent to complete the job here, removing the pipes from the walls and where they ran up into the collection area.

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We took a quick trip up there ourselves, wondering if maybe Haniel would be up there. He wasn't, but there was another forlorn looking angel chained up to the wall. He didn't seem happy to see us.

"Come to gloat some more you- oh," he said as we walked in.

"Actually, we wondered if you would like to be released." I said to him.

"This isn't some kind of trick, is it?"

I shook my head and snapped my fingers at Albert. The angel pulled back a little, and Albert grinned a toothy grin.

"Don't worry, I don't bite." He touched each manacle and it flowed off the angel, leaving him standing there, rubbing his wrists.

"Thank you," he said, going across the room to pick up his sword, which was currently sheathed and sitting on a piece of broken down equipment.

"How did you come to be up here?" asked Yasui. "Are you okay? Do you need anything?"

"I'll be fine, thank you for your concern. That summoner who said he was here to remove the extraction pipes waited until my guard was down, then attacked me with several demons. Even I couldn't fight that many, and they captured me. Stuck me up here out of the way and occasionally looked in on me to gloat. Foolish human, his soul will burn one day."

"No doubt soon," said Christina. "He killed his partner too, and we captured him and turned him over to the Foundation."

"Good. They will see justice done, I have no doubt. While I am grateful, you humans really shouldn't be here."

"We're leaving anyway," I said. "I have one other question though- where's Haniel? Isn't he the one to guard the tree?"

The angel shook his head. "I know not. He asked me some time ago to take over his duties here while he was otherwise occupied. I thought it might be interesting to visit the human world and see the tree, so I agreed. I didn't think he would be gone this long, however."

We all looked at each other.

"You don't think he ran into trouble, do you?"

"His task was to guard the tree. If Michael found him away from his post, there may have been consequences for him. However, no other angel has come here, so I can only guess this deception has not yet been discovered. I will stay here in his place until I hear otherwise or he returns."

"I understand. We'll be on our way now. Oh, we took care of more than half of the pipes. Someone will be along to take care of the rest. Hopefully someone a little more trustworthy this time."

ROBERT ZIEFEL

“I hope so. I would help, if it wasn’t beneath my station. Those pipes simply must be taken away from here as soon as possible. Make sure your Foundation knows that.”

The angel flew off towards the tree, and we made our way back down past the trunk to take care of one last thing.

Jerk, all of us were thinking.

Back on the beach we buried Zach and said a few words, then gave Albert the hummingbird spirit again and made our way back to the school. I stacked a bunch of bloodiron pipes in the school’s alchemy lab, but said there were plenty more where that came from, if they wanted it. The alchemy teacher, a very old looking man with a long white beard, thanked me over and over, which was a little embarrassing. I guess both he and Albert had a lot of ideas for the stuff, so this was quite the treasure for them. Albert said the crystal would be almost done by now, he would bring it to me in a day or two and thanked me for my help.

“Hey, I think we all did good today,” I said.

He agreed.

Equine Mystery

And it's Cherry Blossom in the lead by a nose!

Three weeks passed before my new energy talisman was complete, which of course dragged. I had a spirit clone working on it while I was in class, but it was still slow going. The lump of bloodiron was easy, as that one I would need to activate with my own energy, cutting the number of hours I needed to work on it in half. So I had that one right away, and knew it worked, as I could activate it and charge energy into it, which of course Christina didn't find all that big a deal.

"I can do that on my own," she said, unimpressed. "What's the big deal?"
Girls.

Finally the diagram for the energy draining crystal was ready, so with great ceremony I invited Albert and Osman to my dorm (well, Osman was there anyway but you get the point) and energized it. I held the crystal in my hand a few minutes and did a spirit sense on it, and was rewarded with a weak feeling of energy inside. It had worked! Albert couldn't tell me the total carrying capacity of the crystal, but he said he made it as best he could. He said that, after all, he wasn't a jiangshi, was he? He couldn't assign a number to how much energy people had.

"I'm sure it will be fine, this is a big crystal," I told him.

"How exactly are you going to carry it?" he asked.

"You're going to reshape it, right?"

"I did agree to do that earlier didn't I? Did you have something specific in mind?"

"How about just a rod? That'll fit in my pocket so it'll be easy to carry."

“Rod?” he said, offended. “A rod? As if there was some artistic meaning to a simple rod. You put weeks of work into something I make into the shape of a rod? Give that here, I’m cooking you up a freaking masterpiece.” He was smiling as he said this, so I knew he wasn’t seriously offended or anything.

So I handed him the crystal and the blob of bloodiron that would serve as the covering, and he turned away from me. Osman looked over his shoulder, interested, and I felt Albert’s power going into the pieces, reflowing them. He spent more than a minute looking it over and making adjustments, and finally decided he was finished. He turned back to me, a shape peeking out of his cupped hands.

“Are you ready for this?”

“Just show me already!”

“Suspenseful, huh? Here you go!”

He took away his top hand, and there in his palm sat a long, serpentine dragon, breathing fire, and complete with tiny scales, claws, eyes, the whole works.

“Better than a rod, huh?”

I reverently took the dragon and held it up to the light. Osman whistled.

“This is amazing work, the detail is incredible. I thought my tiny sword was impressive, but this... Thanks Albert, this really is a great piece, and it’s still rod shaped so it’ll fit in my pocket.”

“That was the idea. Glad you like it.”

“I love it, this is great. This is something I wouldn’t mind passing on as an inherited item someday. Now, as promised, I have something for you, Osman.”

I slipped the dragon into my pocket and unclipped the sword talisman from my leg. “Here you go, take good care of it.” I then took out another chain I had made and transferred my phase talisman to the other leg, so now I had one on each. That way my regeneration wouldn’t have to stop in order for me to phase, which was nice.

Osman thanked me and clipped it around his own leg.

“So, have you decided on what sort of weapon you want me to make you?” I asked.

“Tell me more about this building destroying blast.”

“Going top shelf, huh?” I smiled. “The original talisman would take maybe half your energy to initiate and create a, what’s 80 feet, about 25 meters blast radius. It could be centered just out of range, and would pretty much tear anything inside that radius apart. Impressed yet?”

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He nodded.

“The unfortunate thing with that one is, that’s all you get. You have no control over how big a blast you make, in other words. You would just point, activate it, and get out of the way. Now, I’ve been looking into ways to make it work a little differently, so that it could be controlled a little easier. I’m confident I could create a lesser version that took only a little energy, had a much greater range, but a bit smaller radius. Say, 55 feet, that’s about 17 meters. That’s the maximum radius, you could make it anywhere from a couple of feet or the whole fifty-five. The range would be anywhere within about 500 feet, or more than 160 meters away. The way I see it, with your eyes it’s better to be further away than have a larger radius, right?”

“It’s not even that much smaller.”

“That’s only because I’m such a great artificer. Really, it’s true. So is that what you want?”

“It seems like the best thing for me.”

“I agree. Now, what element would you like? Fire?”

“No, too dangerous, as other things around what I engulfed could catch fire. Also more demons than I can name are immune to it. I was thinking wind, actually.”

“Okay, wind it is. Do you want a tattoo or an item?”

“Is there a difference?”

“It’s going to take me a little over a week of work to make it either way, and making the tattoo wouldn’t take me that much longer than making you a tiny charm like the sword.”

“So long?”

“Find me a spirit energist with wind nature willing to synchronize with me for hours on end and I could probably shave off two days, otherwise, yeah. I don’t want to mess it up and have to start over.”

“I’m sorry to put you to such trouble.”

“Don’t worry about it. With my new talisman done,” I patted my pocket, “I don’t have anything planned for the moment, and I need the practice. I’m glad to do it.”

“I appreciate it.”

“What are friends for? Just like Albert making me this crystal, right? We help each other out, we all win. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get started!”

As promised, a week later I held up a slip of special paper with a tattoo on it, which looked pretty good if I did say so myself. I told him he

could put it anywhere, but he insisted on the palm of his hand. He said he would rather not use it, and this way he could threaten someone with it by showing it to them, and maybe scare them off without hurting them. I had to admit it made sense. I transferred the tattoo to his right hand and we went out into the forest by the school to try it. Albert made a roughly human shaped figure out of dirt, then turned it into stone, and we walked away from it. Osman hooked into the Tyrfing talisman, concentrated on seeing it, then snapped his fingers.

“Huh,” he said simply.

“Didn’t it work? I was so careful!”

“No, it worked. Let’s go so you can see for yourself.”

We walked over to where the “statue” was, and took a look at the damage done by the wind. Oddly, the legs seemed intact, only the right leg seemed to have taken any damage, but was still mostly there. The body however was nearly unrecognizable, and the head had been blasted apart totally.

Osman stood staring at the remains. “Don’t tell me you’re disappointed?” I asked. “You totally took this stone golem in one shot, with no practice using the attack, from that kind of distance! That’s pretty impressive!”

“I know, I just thought it would be more damaged, given what the explosion looked like.” He picked up an arm from where it had fallen. “Look at this arm, there’s hardly a mark on it.”

“Well, bursts of elemental power like this are pretty chaotic. Even though it filled an area, there are still ways it moves and reacts that cause it to not just destroy everything. Tell you what, let’s move a little bit further away from the school, there must be a clearing around here someplace.”

We walked awhile and came upon a very nice clearing, which I asked Albert to fill with a bunch of stone people, if he could. He pulled out Tyrfake and got to work, creating a dozen figures in various poses scattered around, then turned them all into stone.

“That’s about it for me today. I’m good, but this still takes energy.”

“Not a problem, this looks great.” I turned to Osman. “Ready to try again?”

He shrugged. “Let’s do it.”

We backed quite a ways away and Osman again did whatever he did with his eyes to see them, then snapped again. There was a tremendous explosion in the distance, which sounded like a tornado had touched down for a second. Birds cried out in alarm and flew in all directions from near there. Everything went still after that.

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“Huh,” Osman said.

“Don’t start that again. Come on, let’s go have a look.”

We saw that most of the statues were completely blown apart, but it looked like some had shielded others or something, as the destruction wasn’t complete.

“Still,” I said as we surveyed what was left, “These are stone people, not flesh people. It would be a rare demon that was as tough as stone anyway, right? I’m guessing using that against an actual person would probably kill them instantly, at the very least mess them up really bad. I just hope you never have to use it like that.”

“I hope so too,” Osman replied, looking around. “But against demons, that’s a different story. I think I have a weapon worthy of Heavenly service now. Thank you.”

“My pleasure. Should we clean this up?”

“I don’t know if I have the energy right now,” replied Albert. “I’ll have to come back and do it later.”

“One moment,” said Osman, calling us over. He concentrated on one, and a tiny burst of wind struck the leg of the furthest away one, toppling it over. “Good,” he remarked. “I can make it small as well, and only hit one leg if I needed to. I’m satisfied, let’s head back.”

Things were pretty quiet until a couple of weeks later, about 7:30 at night when I heard a knock at the door. Osman, who had finally stopped glancing at his palm every few minutes a couple of days ago, looked up and said it was Yasui, and something must be wrong. I went over to open the door, and she collapsed into my arms, sobbing.

“Yasui, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Oh, it’s terrible,” she sobbed. “Chestnut is dead, and I found her.”

I looked over at Osman, who shrugged, and I gently moved us over to the bed so she could sit down.

“Come on, Yasui, tell me what this is all about. You know I’ll do anything I can to help.”

“That’s just it, you can’t, no one can. She’s dead and there’s nothing we can do about it. Who would do something like that?”

I couldn’t get anything else out of her, and fairy Katrina flew over to me. “I could calm her down with emotional influence if you wanted,” she offered.

“Better not,” I decided. “Better to let her get through this on her own.”

So I just held her a few minutes until she calmed down enough to tell us the story.

“I’m in the riding club and one of the horses was missing when we went down to the stable this afternoon after classes,” she began. “What was weird is that even the seers couldn’t tell where she had gone. So we split up to look for her, and I of course split myself up with spirit clone and we all went out looking for her. We looked for hours and I didn’t want to give up but some other girls had already gone back. Finally one of my clones found her out in the forest, dead.”

“Wow,” I said, concerned. “How awful. Are there any horse eating animals on the island?” asked Osman. “I know some birds were brought here and released, and squirrels and things, but I didn’t think there were wolves or anything.”

“No, you don’t understand, a person did this. Her head... it was blown completely off!” Yasui looked horrified as she said this, and threatened to cry again, but got herself under control. “The seers couldn’t find her because in a big circle around her were a bunch of wards that prevent seer powers from working.” She then spat out something, probably unflattering, in Japanese and glowered.

“That must have been terrible, finding her like that,” Osman said after a while, coming up behind her and putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Yeah, I-” Yasui suddenly realized she was holding onto me and sprang away from us both. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, I mean, I was upset and I wanted to tell you and it suddenly just all came out and you must think I’m-”

“Yasui,” I said, interrupting. “It’s not a big deal, honestly. You don’t have to hold back around us, you know that. We’re your friends.”

“So’s Christina, and she would say I was just being silly,” she said, trying to smile and wiping her eyes.

“She’s a special case. I’m glad you told us,” I said. “I’m not sure what we can do, given that I’m sure seers and ESPers are already on the case, but if you think we should...”

“No, I just sort of ran here blindly, I didn’t mean to disturb you or anything.”

“What, this fascinating math homework I’m forced to complete, taking valuable talisman making time away from me? I’d rather talk to you. Heck I’d rather go fight some demons, that would at least *end* one way or the other!”

Yasui smiled a little at that. “Thanks, I feel a little better now. I’d better go.”

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“We’ll see you tomorrow.”

The next day in homeroom it was announced that seers would be speaking to every person to ascertain who had killed the horse the day before, and first period would be delayed until the task was done.

They must not have found anything if they have to resort to this sort of method, I thought to myself. *What the heck killed that horse?*

A seer teacher, Mr Lamberti, came in with a couple of 4th year students of his and questioned everyone about the incident. I only knew what Yasui told me, and it seemed no-one here knew anything about it, so they left again. After a while it was announced we could go to our first class, but the announcer didn’t sound happy.

“Didn’t they find anyone who knew anything?” Yasui asked me at lunch that afternoon.

“I guess not, nothing’s been announced, and there are no rumors of someone being pulled out of class,” I answered.

“All this fuss over a horse,” said Christina. “I don’t get it. Just buy another one.”

“It’s not just about the horse,” Yasui said hotly. “Someone did something horrible on the island and seers can’t figure out who did it. That’s serious!”

“I guess,” she replied. “Think someone from Porta did it?”

“Why would someone from town kill a horse?” Osman asked. “There’s no motive.”

Katrina, in fairy form, was sitting on the salt shaker between us. “Besides,” she said. “Artificers wouldn’t do something like that, would they Dean?”

“Darn right,” I answered. “What would be the point?”

“Was there any indication of other activity where the body was found?” she asked Yasui. “I’m just thinking the only reason to kill something around here is related to demons. Did you see anything weird that a demon might have done?”

She shook her head. “The only weird thing I saw was some large indentations in the ground, like something really heavy walked back and forth a bunch of times. Otherwise it was just the wards in a circle, and in the middle was the horse.”

“Something heavy...” Kat said. “I’ll have to think about that.”

“There must be something we can do. Dean, you’ve got all kinds of powers, right? We have to find the person responsible, make sure they don’t do something like this again!”

I hesitated. "I'm no seer," I said, scratching my neck. "If they can't find anything out, what chance do I have?"

"You have that look, don't hold out on me now, Dean."

"What look?" I asked, indignantly.

"Like there's a talisman you want to make."

"You noticed that too?" asked Osman. "I thought it was something like that."

"Now wait just a second, you're saying I have a look?"

They all nodded, even Christina.

"Fine, okay, there's a talisman, okay? But it's pretty complex and I'm not even sure it would work. I suppose it could be useful elsewhere, but honestly, making it just for this seems like overkill."

"What are you thinking of?"

I sighed. "It's something I read about. You take a picture frame and turn it into a sort of window into the past. Then you carry it to where you want to see and tell it what time you want to view. It would take a lot of very expensive ink, not that the cost worries me now, but almost a month to make permanent. Activating it would take a bunch of energy, but I suppose you wouldn't be going around activating it all the time. Making it energy based would only take about a week and a half."

"I get it," Yasui said, excited. "We carry it back to the place Chestnut died, and tell it to show us the time she was killed, and we can see who did it! Because it's not a seer power, it wouldn't get blocked off! You're just peering through time, no defense against that!"

"Well, I think you can only tell it a specific time, so we could say "a week and a half ago" and then rewind it to the exact moment."

"Whatever, that sounds great, will you do it for me?"

"I guess I made something for Osman when he asked. I can't exactly refuse you, now can I?"

"Oh Dean, thank you, thank you so much!" She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

"Hey, none of that physical stuff, you two. Some of us get a little jealous about it, you know!" said Katrina, standing up and stomping her tiny foot.

We all laughed, but I stopped first.

"You'll have to be there if I'm making it for you," I said.

"What, why? You gave your, you know, to Osman here, right?"

"I passed ownership of the item to him, yes. I never got a very good explanation of it myself, but I'll try to explain it. I was telling Osman about

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it when we were talking about what he wanted, about how you can't get something for nothing. Making a talisman, it sort of, I don't know, it takes away from me in some way."

"Takes what away from you?"

"I guess you would call it... potential? Like if I make a talisman, I wouldn't be able to learn how to play the oboe as well. It didn't make sense to me when it was explained, they just said not to make too many talismans too close together for yourself if you wanted to learn how to do anything that month."

"But you're working on them all the time!"

"I have a bunch in progress, if that's what you mean. That's just in case I want to quickly finish one later. There's no power behind that, though, just me drawing on paper. Making one requires the object and energizing the spiral, and that's what takes my 'potential' away. Just trust me, making this for you requires you to be there while I work, and you'll have to give up a little of your potential to 'own' it."

Yasui looked doubtful. "If you want to spend more time with me, you don't have to make up weird excuses."

"I'm not! It's a thing, ask any artificer. And I do like spending time with you, but this is different, it's totally different!"

Yasui looked around, settling on a girl a few tables away. "Okay, we'll see." She got up and walked over to her.

"Oh, you're in trouble now," said Christina.

"He sure is," echoed Katrina, putting her hands over her mouth and giggling.

"We'll see who's laughing when she gets back."

We waited, and Yasui and the girl talked a moment, and Yasui looked thoughtful. She came back over.

"I guess I owe you an apology. She couldn't explain it any better, but she said you were right Dean. Just tell me the time, I'll be there."

"Humph," said Kat, crossing her arms.

6

Mutiny

“You openly betray the party, for either the right or wrong reasons.”

So for the next week and a half Yasui came to my room after class so I could work on her picture frame talisman. She did homework, and talked to Katrina, and generally hung out and watched me work. Talking to Katrina was a little odd. Sometimes she wouldn't project Illusions to all of us, so I'd only hear half the conversation, like she was talking on a phone. But she never tried to rush me, and she didn't bother me when I was going over the detail work to make sure I had all the lines and symbols right. She was good company, and I enjoyed having her around. Finally one evening I energized the diagram and handed Yasui her first talisman.

“How do I make it work?” she asked, holding it this way and that.

“Just put some spiritual power into it and tell it exactly what time you want to see. It'll work.”

“Okay!” she said, brightly. “Twenty-four hours ago!”

The frame suddenly showed an image of me working, and talking to Yasui the night before. There was no sound, but I remembered it, and there we were.

“It's working,” breathed Yasui, “I can see through time with this. I mean, I knew it would work, you're awesome, but to actually see through time...”

“The past, anyway,” I corrected. “Up to four hundred years in the past, to be specific. I could have made it more, but that would have made it take even longer. I figured four hundred was enough. You can concentrate on speeding it up or slowing it down, too.”

She concentrated. “Oh look, you're changing!”

THE UNVEILED WORLD

I hastily threw my hands over her eyes. "Right, we've tested it enough here, let's go see who did that heinous, horrible act to Chestnut, shall we?"

She wiggled free and skipped to the door, looking over her shoulder. "Don't be so modest Dean. Kat's already told me everything, so it's no big deal. We'll test it first thing tomorrow, okay? Thanks again, you're the best!" She laughed her way down the hall, clutching the frame under one arm.

As she skipped out the door Katrina appeared, human sized this time and very red in the face.

"I did not!" she shouted.

"Katrina Usmanov!" I said, unsure if I should be angry or embarrassed. "You *promised* when we first met!"

"But I didn't, honest, I mean, I didn't tell her anything."

"So you have been peeping on me?"

"Eep!" she said, and disappeared.

"You can't hide inside Osman forever!" I shouted to Osman.

"Is everything okay in here?" said our floor monitor, sticking his head in through the open doorway. He looked around. "Who are you talking to?"

"Ah—" I started to say, whipping my head around to look at Osman again, but he was gone!

I quickly looked left and right, nope, nowhere in sight. *What the?* I thought.

"I'm just, uh, practicing lines for a play!" I said, thinking fast.

"Whatever, just keep it down."

"Sure, sure. Sorry about that!"

He shook his head and walked off, and suddenly Osman was back again.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Osman? What? Stop shouting." I hissed.

"Oh, thank goodness, suddenly you all acted like you couldn't see me anymore, that was so... Katrina, did you use masking on me?"

The next morning I acted totally normal towards Yasui, and she didn't say anything either, but she did keep glancing at me and fighting to not smile. We had about twenty minutes to get to class, but Yasui was confident we could catch the killer in that time. She held out the time window frame and told it to show the appropriate night, which it did. She fast forwarded it, and there was a blur, so she backtracked and we crowded around to watch the scene unfold.

Two hooded figures stand in a clearing in the woods, obviously talking to each other. One of them ties Chestnut to a tree and spreads wards in a circle around her. The other is gesturing and seems to be speaking. Meanwhile, the first figure is putting wards on the horse's neck, then steps back. Suddenly there's a flash, and a very tall being that seems to be made of rock appears. He and the summoner talk, then the summoner gestures to the other, who points to the wards. He then throws down two wards, which become a column of light. One which he steps through and disappears, one which the summoner steps through. The wards burn away and the demon looks over at the horse. She's whinnying and trying to pull away from the demon, but the rope holds her fast.

The demon waits a moment more, probably savoring the animal's terror, then must say something. The horse's head explodes in gore as the wards go off, killing it. Yasui gives a little whimper, but keeps watching. I set my hand on her shoulder and she takes it, leaving one hand on the frame. The demon seems pleased, he's nodding and rocking back and forth like he enjoyed the show. Another circle comes into being, and the hooded figure steps through, and gestures to the horse. The demon nods and smiles, and thirty seconds later it disappears. The hooded figure steps through the circle again, and it winks out.

We stand, stunned at what we've just witnessed. Obviously two students are making a deal with a powerful demon, and they killed a horse as part of it. Then just walked away thinking they would never get caught. Yasui must have thought along the same lines as she whispered "You won't get away with it."

"The flash when the demon appears, that's the time," said Osman finally.

"Yeah," replied Yasui, wiping her eye. "We've got you, jerk."

She moved the frame and reactivated it, slowing it almost to a crawl as the event approached, waiting for the flash. When it happened, Osman took a picture with Yasui's phone while zoomed into the frame, giving us a nice, clear shot of his face. She then repositioned it again so we could do the same for the other one, the one that set the wards. I'm fuming, an artificer, using wards like this!? I'm glad I made this for Yasui, it seems to be working out perfectly. The cost and time don't matter when we can nail this guy and get him expelled for sure.

We all made our way up to the principal's office, just as the bell was ringing for first period. We missed homeroom, but this was more important.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“Why aren’t you kids- oh, Dean and company. Something bothering you guys?”

“I think we need a snappier name than Dean and company. Though I do like the direction he’s picked,” I said to Osman. “Remind me to work on that later.”

“What about Osman’s Avengers?” asked Osman.

“AHEM!” said Yasui. “Mr DeLefeu, we’ve caught Chestnut’s murderer red handed.” She held out her phone with the photo. “And here’s the proof.”

Mr DeLefeu chuckled. “I should have known if anyone could crack the case it would be you guys. What took you so long?”

“I may be on my way to the title of the best talisman maker on Earth,” I replied. “But it still takes me some time to get them finished.”

“Well, let’s see it,” he said, taking the phone. He switched between the two photos on the screen and honestly they came out okay for basically being pulled out of thin air. We told him the whole story of what we saw, and he leaned back in his chair, concerned.

“I know these two, they’re good guys. This doesn’t make sense. Brian and Rivka are both excellent students, they’ve never been a problem. I’ll have them called out of class, see what they have to say for themselves. Wait out in the hall, I’ll be there shortly.”

“Shouldn’t we get to class ourselves?” asked Osman.

“You’re the one’s accusing them, they have the right to face their accusers. You have to present your evidence to them too. I hope you’re confident.”

“We can show it again, I know right were to go and what time to ask for now.”

“Okay,” he said, getting up. “I’ll make some calls, you wait out in the hall.”

So we all went down to the forest and were met by Brian and Rivka, who were most definitely the kids we saw. Also Mrs Darjiling, a seer, was there. I noticed Mr DeLefeu had put on his gloves, and I wished I had my armor undershirt on. Too late for that now. I at least activated my dragon so I could pull extra energy if I needed it. The two looked confused, and didn’t act like they knew each other, but that’s all it could be, an act. Yasui brought out the frame and showed them what happened, but their reaction wasn’t one I anticipated.

“No way,” said Brian, the summoner. “That is not me. I like horses, I would never do that. Besides, I don’t know how to summon a cherufe, like you saw they require a sacrifice, and I couldn’t do that!”

Rivka said basically the same thing, “Why would I even do something like this? When did this happen? I think I was with my girlfriend at that time, you can ask her. I mean... uh.”

“Humm... being cleared of a crime by being fingered at the scene of another, interesting tactic. Mandara?” asked Mr DeLefeu.

“They’re both telling the truth as far as I can tell,” Mrs Darjiling said. “Sorry guys. Also, was that the best way to have put that?” she asked Mr DeLefeu, an odd look on her face.

“Hum?”

“But they’re right there- look,” Yasui said, shaking the frame at them.

“Oh, I admit that’s compelling evidence, and a very useful tool I’ll have to look into making for myself, actually. Where do you find all these talismans anyway, Dean?”

“I read a lot?” I said, embarrassed.

“He practically does nothing else,” muttered Yasui.

“Well, if he studied wards a little more he would recognize that whoever this artificer is, he’s pretty good. He didn’t want to get caught in this little escapade so he thought it through. Here, I’ll show you.”

He pulled an ink bottle, brush and paper out of his pouch and quickly made a ward, infusing it with energy. He stuck it to himself, and suddenly there were two of me standing there!

“What I made was the... well, why don’t you tell us, Rivka.”

“Imitate,” said Rivka, “That’s how he did it, I was framed with an imitate ward.”

“Whoever this artificer is, they really know their stuff,” said the fake me. “Using screen wards, explode wards, trigger, imitate, all in combination to throw us off track to who they really are. Any artificer could do it, wards aren’t that hard to learn. Considering all the posable ways we might have found out though, that’s impressive. He really covered his bases.”

“So there’s nothing we can do?” I asked angrily.

He shook his head and returned to normal, taking the ward off and watching it burn away. “I’m really sorry you guys. You obviously put a lot of thought and effort into this plan, but this guy was still one step ahead of you. I don’t know of any other way to track him down. Sorry.”

“Looks like I failed you, Yasui. Sorry it was all for nothing.” I stormed off to class, seething.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

I went through the day angry, looking at my fellow artificers. I wondered who had fallen so far as to betray the art like they did. I wanted to help Yasui catch this guy because it was important to her, but I had failed. All that work too; wasted effort. I hardly spoke to anyone that day, and didn't even feel like reading or working on anything. I had let her down, and my guilt gnawed at me like a hundred rats. I fell asleep that night like I was trying to drown myself in unconsciousness, not even saying goodnight to Osman. My mistake- he might have told me of his plans if I hadn't been so distant. That's why he didn't wake me when he got up in the middle of the night, took my dragon talisman from my nightstand, and slipped out into the hallway.

"I don't like this," he said to Yasui, after she had snuck him up to the roof of the girl's dorm building. "It's wrong." They were on the edge of the building, facing the boy's dorm, and Yasui had a plan to redeem the time window talisman.

"You saw how he was today," she replied. "He thinks the talisman he put so much effort into making me was useless. We have to show him it's not."

"But if we do find him this way, shouldn't we just report it?"

"To who? We went to the principal once already. That was our one chance, and we blew it. We have to confront this guy, get him to turn himself in. Now are you going to try it, or not?"

"Okay, okay, we'll try it." Osman held the dragon in his hand and concentrated on it, bringing power into himself. He was shocked at the amount it held, so many times greater than his own it was almost disgusting. Using his eye powers did take a little energy, and with Yasui acting like she was ready to make him do this until he got a result, he figured he would need it. He also hooked into his own personal one, figuring it couldn't hurt.

Why did I have to be born with such a meager amount of energy, he thought to himself. Dean has so much more, and now with this, even more than that!

Jealousy doesn't become you, Katrina said to him silently. We all have our gifts, if we use them at the proper time. For all his abilities, he couldn't do what you're about to, now could he?

But he made it possible.

The All-Father made all things possible. Are you jealous of Him?

Point taken.

Yasui activated the frame, setting it to the right time and holding it up for me. My job was to look through it and find out where the two had disappeared to when they vanished from the forest. Yasui had thought about it all day, and said the most logical place would be their rooms. That way they could honestly say they had been in their beds when Chestnut was killed. I wasn't sure it would work, if the window would let me see into the past that far away from the talisman, but I was willing to give it a try. Interestingly, it worked, but it was slow going, taking probably a half an hour for me to finally spot them. Having meticulously combed the rooms in the boy's dorm from my superior vantage point, I saw two people pop into separate rooms simultaneously. I knew these were our guys.

The question was, what did I tell Yasui? She looked like she was ready to spring down there and rough these guys up when I told her I'd found them.

You could just lie and say you didn't, said Katrina to me.

You know I can't do that. I'm a terrible liar for one, she's sure to see right through me. I just don't think people like me should get in the habit of telling untruths.

You and your compulsive honesty, Katrina sighed. *Fine, I'll tell her. Stay still and I'll put the illusion in her mind that you're talking. Where should I send her though?*

Third floor, room 310 is empty. Also the second floor, room 253 is used for storage, you can send her there.

She has her boots on, she's going to get over there fast, and figure something's up almost immediately.

I know, I have a plan.

I hope so. Stay still now.

"Really? I knew it would work, Osman. You're the best!" Yasui said, suddenly. "I know how you feel about this, so I won't involve you. Just go back to bed. With luck he'll never even know you took it, and we can tell him about how you caught them in the morning." Without warning, she dropped off the side of the building, landed, and raced off in the direction of the boy's dorm.

I really am starting to hate people with active powers, I thought, gathering energy for a petitioning. I put what must have been double my total amount of energy into a ritual to get it here quickly, and two koma-inu appeared. Standing as tall as a horse, but looking more like a lion crossed with a dog, they looked at me sternly but did not speak.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“I need your help,” I quickly pleaded. “My friend has gone to confront someone powerful and I’m afraid that she may be hurt in her haste to see justice done. Will you help me protect him until she calms down?”

The nearest one to me padded over and bent down, indicating I should get on.

“Thank you,” I said to it, climbing on. “We have to reach that building over there—” pointing, and without even letting me finish, both bounded into the air, landed on nothing, jumped again, and I found himself atop the boy’s dorm, just like that.

“Come with me!” I said, throwing the door open and rushing inside. The two koma-inu shrank a little to fit through the door, then regained their size in the hallway. I stopped in front of the summoner’s door, knowing it was him by the timing of the teleport he did with the ward. I pounded on the door, then realized how bad it would look to him seeing these two massive, angelic creatures flanking me. I turned to tell them to go guard the ends of the hallway or something but the door opened, and in surprise the guy who opened it swore and slammed it shut again. I heard a commotion inside, and had time to reflect on just how badly this situation was going to go, when something large crashed through the door, barely caught by the koma-inu as the dark shape lunged out at me.

I awoke to an explosion and rolled out of bed, making a grab for my dragon talisman as I stumbled past, but my fingers didn’t close on anything. I sleepily made another grab for it without looking, as I heard another blast coming from above me, and recognized it as an explosion of wind energy. Coming more fully awake now I glanced first at my nightstand, which did not have an amazing dragon shaped energy talisman sitting on top of it. I then looked to my roommate’s bed, which did not have a person inside it.

“What did you do?” I shouted to no-one in particular. I rushed over and grabbed my phase talisman, then created a couple of spirit clones by shouting “spirit clone.” We all phased, then used grasshoppers leap to jump up to the floor above, startling the two people in the room. They were glancing out their door, but I didn’t waste time trying to move past them, I just phased through the wall and ran towards the source of the noise.

Several large dog looking things fought with several other, larger, dog looking things, while Osman was on the ground, furiously blasting controlled bursts of wind energy at what looked like wolves. Those not being hit with that were being flung every which way without apparent means. I was taken aback a second, but saw him tightly gripping my dragon

in one hand, so I knew where all his energy was coming from, at least. I was about to call out my beaver so I could help Osman when several teachers and the principal appeared in the hallway and demanded “this fight cease at once!”

One of the wolves leapt for a teacher, but someone did something and it disappeared in a burst. The others were also swiftly dispatched. I let my clones go, and Osman thanked his whatever those things were, and released them. Yasui ran up, murder in her eyes, yelling something about Osman tricking her, but she stopped when she saw the hallway. Large chunks of it were missing, no doubt caused by Osman’s wind blasts. The door to the student’s room was blasted off the hinges, outward it looked like, and in general the place looked like a war zone. Which was fair, given that it had been, just a second ago. The principal glared at me.

“I expected better from you, Dean.”

“Now wait just one minute,” I protested. “I just got here. I don’t-”

“Save your excuses for later-” he tried to interrupt, but Mrs LaRoche was there and interrupted his interruption.

“Let him finish, he’s not lying.”

“What?” said Mr DeLefeu. “You don’t know anything about this?”

“No, I came running when I heard the sounds of fighting. That’s all I know. Like I said, I just got here.”

Mr DeLefeu looked over at Mrs LaRoche who nodded. “Oh. I still want an explanation for all this. Demons fighting angels in the halls? I want to know who started this, and I want to know now!”

Both Osman and an older guy in the room said “He started it,” at the same time and pointed to each other.

“I started it?” Osman said, fire in his eyes. “You attacked me!”

“You came to my door with those dog things!” the guy said.

“I didn’t realize it until I had already knocked, then it was too late. I just wanted to convince you go turn yourself in, I wasn’t going to hurt you. I was trying to protect you from her, she would have hurt you!” He pointed to Yasui.

Mr DeLefeu rubbed his temples. “I think this is going to be a long night. Dean, Osman, Yasui, Thad, Corinne- come with me.”

We all went to a disused room, and Mr DeLefeu unlocked it, went inside, and snapped on the light. He turned to face us.

“Thad, what happened?”

“I got woken up by this kid here and his two dog things and I thought he was going to attack me so I summoned something.”

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“What indication did he give that he was going to attack?”

“I don’t know, it was dark. What would you think, someone showing up with strange creatures at your door?”

“I see. Osman, what happened?”

“After Yasui and I came up with a new plan to find out who killed the horse-”

“You guys are still hung up on that?”

“Isn’t it important?” I asked quietly. “Because obviously you’re not lazy enough to just let the death of anything by a student- so they can later summon a very powerful demon- go unchallenged. Just because it’s a little work to find out who did it?”

He glared at me. “Go on, Osman.”

“After we found out, Yasui was acting like she was going to do something stupid, and ran off to the room Katrina told her I saw him teleport into.”

“Which was a closet, by the way. Thanks for that.” said Yasui angrily. “Wait, Katrina? But-”

“Go on,” said Mr DeLefeu, clenching his teeth.

“So I got over here first to try and warn him to turn himself in, so Yasui would have no cause to fight him or whatever it would turn into. After I knocked on his door I realized my two koma-inu were still with me. I was turning to tell them to hide when the door opened, then slammed, and this thing jumped out at me. My komi-inu took it, but more started showing up. I defended myself, and you guys arrived.”

Mr DeLefeu looked at Mrs LaRoche who nodded. “Fine. So this is your latest suspect in the whole horse caper, is it? How did you find him this time?”

“The same way we found him the last time,” said Yasui, smugly. “We just had to do it farther away.”

“What?”

“I stood on the roof of the girl’s dorm and looked through the time window talisman with my eye powers active, which let me see through the walls. We made it go slowly back and forth over the time they teleported and I saw both of them appear in their rooms.”

“You did it, didn’t you? You killed that horse!” Yasui shouted at the boy, her hands in fists and trembling.

“No,” he said, smugly. “I didn’t kill any horse.”

We all looked at Mrs LaRoche, who said “He’s telling the truth.”

“You got that artificer to kill the horse,” Osman demanded.

“No, I don’t know any artificers who have killed horses.”

Again, Mrs LaRoche said he was being truthful.

Yasui and Osman both started talking at once, but I just started laughing. They stared at me.

“You find something about this situation funny?” Mr DeLefeu asked me.

“Yes I do,” I answered. “I just figured out the reason he can be totally truthful and still make it look like we’ve got the wrong guy.” Osman started to say something, but I held up a hand. “It’s because we’re asking the wrong questions, aren’t we, Mr Horse Murderer?”

“I’m telling you-”

“Yes, yes, you’ve very clever. Answer me this, then, if you will. Did you, not five minutes before the horse died, have an artificer place wards upon said horse? Who then activated them to go off, after you teleported away. The activation done either through the use of yet another ward, being timed, or by some action on the part of the demon?” Whew.

He looked uncomfortable for the first time, and said nothing.

“Well, answer the question,” demanded Mr DeLefeu.

“No?” he said, hesitantly.

We all looked over at Mrs LaRoche, who smiled at us. “You’ve got him,” she said.

“Ah hah, I knew it!” said Yasui, running to me and giving me a big hug.

“Wait, so you did kill the horse?” said Mr DeLefeu, confused.

“No!” protested Thad.

He considered. “But you did have an artificer, known to you, create wards that later killed the horse, such that you might strike a bargain with a cherufe demon?”

“Yes,” he said, resigned.

“I guess we’re going to have a little talk about your future, young man. And the future of your artificer friend.”

“We did it!” shouted Yasui, grabbing my hands and jumping up and down. “We solved the case!”

“And I would have gotten away with it, if it hadn’t been for you kids.”

For some reason, the teachers couldn’t stop laughing for a half an hour after that. We asked them what the joke was, and they said to go look up some old cartoon show called “Scooby-Doo.”

Whatever that was.

Soul

If you want to play Jazz, you've got to have soul!

So things were pretty readily patched up between Osman and myself, though I did tell him any time he wanted to borrow my talismans he could just ask. He said he would probably leave the heroics to me from now on, one taste of that kind of spirit energy was enough for him. It was “requested” by the principal that I ask someone before giving any more fellow students weapons of mass destruction. I explained that if the Heavenly powers selected Osman to be trustworthy enough to petition and direct angels in our realm, I could trust him too. He tried, but he couldn’t think of a good counter-argument for that one.

Yasui didn’t quite understand how the artificer was able to get by the questioning done by the seers, but it was later revealed he had a talisman tattoo on that helped negate their power. I also explained they probably asked something straightforward, like “did you kill the horse?” That wouldn’t have worked, because the artificer just put the wards on, it was the demon who actually said the trigger word we couldn’t hear that set off the explosion. The artificer didn’t believe he killed the horse, so in his mind it wasn’t lying to say he hadn’t. It also came out the summoner had paid the artificer a pretty nice sum of money to do all that, which is why he went along with it. That, and thinking he wouldn’t be caught.

Alchemists patched up the hallway where Osman had his little scuffle, and Yasui was having fun showing people the the last four hundred years of Demonage history with her new talisman. Some AV club members rigged up a camera system for it, so the images it showed could be recorded and displayed. This would document history in a way most had never experienced before. It’s one thing to read that “this and that” happened but quite

another to actually see it happening for yourself.

In fact, Albert told us to go to a certain hallway and ask for a certain time about two years ago if we wanted to see the greatest fighter he had ever known, so we did. We watched an attack be repelled by a rather plain looking spanish girl with white hair who was a spirit hunter. Students were running every which way, when two werewolves and a bunch of ghouls came hustling up from the floor below. Everyone was panicking, trying to get away from them. She just shook her head, traced a symbol in the air, and blew them away in a massive energy blast I envied. The werewolves were hurt pretty bad and jumped out a window, the ghouls were totally blown away. She just calmly looked out the window, drew her sword, shook it out into the form of a whip, and jumped after them.

I asked him what happened to that girl, I wanted to meet her! He said after graduation she fell off the face of the Earth. He said it wouldn't surprise him if she was off training, trying to get even stronger. I told him that was something I approved of, and Yasui got a weird look on her face. Like maybe she wasn't going to take someone else having the title of "greatest fighter" sitting down?

It was nearing the time of the second field trip when something Albert had said to me popped into my head again. I was sitting in ability focused studies class before the bell rang, and I suddenly remembered him saying something about vessels, and how to fight them. I sat for a full minute straining to recall a power he had talked about, but I couldn't do it. He had said something about "if you know some skill that can pull out the soul that's animating it out, go for that." and I had to admit I didn't know any skill like that at all! I frantically hopped out of my seat and took a look at the books that lined the classroom walls that detailed various powers, but nothing I saw fit. I knew there was at least one technique to do it, the ritual that put my soul into the blue egg that now rested in my pouch. A full demon had done that though, and even worse, it took at least an hour to do. Fat chance of making a vessel sit still that long! I was still scanning titles when my teacher Mrs Herrera said "I'd like to start class now, Dean, if that's okay with you."

Everyone laughed, and I realized I had been lost in thought, staring at book titles.

"May I ask a question first?" I asked.

"Of course, Dean, your questions are always thought provoking. Is it about a book, by chance?"

THE UNVEILED WORLD

There was more laughter, but it was good natured. My love of reading talisman making books was well known, and many people came to me for help, even older students. I had a reputation as being a book lover and being generally helpful.

“It’s about a book I’m not seeing,” I said, returning to my seat. “And a possible battle plan. I want to know what I, personally, heck, what everyone in this room should do if they ever had to fight a vessel.”

“You’ve been reading ahead. That will be covered in your demonology course, while they are not actually demons. Who here can tell me what vessels are?”

Several hands went up, and we had a short discussion about what they were.

“But how do you fight them?” I persisted. “A friend said to pull out the soul that’s animating it, but I don’t recall reading about any talisman or power that can do that. That doesn’t mean there isn’t one, right?”

“Well, well, well,” said Mrs Herrena, “I wonder if he wouldn’t mind me telling you about it?” She seemed to think for a moment, looking us over. The room was quiet, we were all waiting for what she had to say. She stepped around her desk and sat on one in the front row, leaning towards us. “Okay, I’ll tell you. It’s not a secret, but it’s not spoken of very much because of policy. I think you should be prepared for facing this power as well, so I’ll tell you.”

We all looked around eagerly, someone whispered “nice one Dean,” to me.

“There is a power type in this world that does not regularly walk the halls of this school, and can you guess why?”

She looked around the room, only a few hands were up, so she pointed to one girl.

“There aren’t enough of that power type to train?”

“Don’t be stupid,” a boy sitting next to her said. “The school trains touched, and there’s only, what two of them per year?”

“I’m sure we could have said that more diplomatically,” she gave him a withering glance, “but he is correct. Is there another guess?”

“It’s only useful in very limited circumstances?”

“The power is too hard to control?”

“It’s too dangerous to teach?”

“Bingo,” Mrs Herrena said. “At least, that’s what our principal believes. About half the staff would allow these students, half would not. Now, why would that be?”

“Dean was talking about souls, it must have something to do with that?” asked one boy.

“Correct. Every one of you will someday die,” she began. “You may think you are immortal,” she glanced at me, “but one day something will kill you. Even if it’s just the sun exploding. What happens after that?”

“Your soul migrates,” someone answered.

“Right, exactly. No matter how you die, be it energy blast, falling in lava, too much cake, the soul continues to exist. Now, who is this not true for?”

“Breath stealers,” one person said.

“That’s right. Who else?”

“Spirit hunters,” someone said quietly.

“You guys are on your game today, that’s right. A spirit hunter currently walking around in their spirit form that dies; ceases to exist. This is the price they pay, and the risk they take, for having weapons of tremendous power to call on. In every confrontation they risk their immortal soul to battle evil as they see it. There is a related power, sort of a reverse spirit hunter, if you will, that can make weapons and armor out of the souls of others.”

There were gasps around the room, and she nodded seriously. “Some of you see the danger. When a spirit hunter chooses to fight, they know exactly what is at risk. But now, you have a person that can yank the very soul from someone and put it to use in battle. But did that person consent? Did they know the risks? If that soul is destroyed it’s gone forever, and that makes the soul wielder one of the most dangerous types of power known to us.

“We allow thirteen year olds to walk our halls that can make energy blasts strong enough to kill a man. Why? Because we know, as sad as death is, the soul lives on. But to have someone that can destroy that very soul, rend it apart like paper? As I’ve said, I support the training of soul wielders. Properly guided, they can be a potent force, turning even demons into weapons they can use.

“Our principal disagrees, he says they’re too vulnerable, needing the soul of another to fight at all, and too easy to corrupt by accident. Any one of you getting attacked by demons has been drilled to respond according to the type of power you use. It comes from inside you, is a part of your very being. But a soul wielder getting attacked would be forced to take a soul from someone else, putting that person in grave risk. I say it’s better to train that person to have a chance, rather than letting demons have their way, and many agree with me. But for the moment those people who are soul wielders are kept apart or ignorant of their powers, only the most trustworthy given any training at all.

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“Now as you know, Dean here can learn the basics of every power, so I think he should talk to the principal about training as a soul wielder, at least at a basic level. But as he’s raised the question, let’s talk about ways we can use our abilities to fight something like a vessel if we encounter one.”

I fairly flew up the stairs at the end of the day to see the principal, who said “Come in Dean,” in a resigned voice as I knocked on his door.

“Don’t tell me I’m the only one who comes to see you?”

“Most students are not falling all over themselves to visit this office as often as you do. In this case Sancha warned me you’d probably be on your way up after school.”

“So you know why I’m here, do you have an answer?”

He sighed, resting his cheek on the palm of his left hand. “Do you really need any more power?” he asked.

“It’s not about power, it’s about protecting innocent souls. There’s a creature out there I would have a hard time beating, and even if I managed it, a soul would be lost. If I can learn a technique to simply draw that soul out without harm, shouldn’t I learn it?”

He regarded me seriously. “Do I have your word the only thing you will pull souls out of are objects or vessels?”

“You do. I wouldn’t trust myself with someone else’s soul otherwise. Besides, like you say, I have more than enough abilities to protect my friends now. And don’t get me started on the talismans I have yet to make.”

“All right, I’ll tell you what. There’s a man I know who I’ve sent some soul wielders to in the past, you can train with him. You picked up all the alchemy skills in a week, right?”

“That was one of the first things I did, yes. I can’t affect anything bigger than a quarter though. I just hope this soul stuff is a little easier.”

“The point is, you can probably pick up the basics in a week, so I’ll tell you what. You can go with him and train while your class goes on the next field trip that’s coming up, how does that sound?”

“Did Luke Skywalker go to Dagoba in search of Yoda, the last Jedi master?”

“Did Princess Leia have to rescue herself when Luke and Han were supposed to be busting her out of prison?”

“Should I stop answering questions with rhetorical Star Wars questions?”

“I’ll let him know you’re coming.”

The third week of September found me saying goodbye to my friends as they went off on their field trip.

“I want a full report now,” I told them.

“Same here,” said Yasui, “I want to see a new confidence in your eye when we return.”

“It’s only going to be a week,” I said, “try not to get killed during your little adventure. You know it’s all faked so don’t go all out, okay?”

“I can if I want,” she said.

I turned to Osman. “Now I’m trusting you to keep an eye on-” I stopped and turned back to Yasui. “I’m trusting you to keep an eye on Osman here.”

“Hey,” protested Osman. “Who held his own against a pack of spirit wolves and a couple of demons?”

“You don’t have my energy reserves any more,” I reminded him.

“I’ll be careful.”

They waved goodbye and the bus sped off down to Porta, where the plane waited to take them on their next field trip; Africa. I was going the “easy” way, via computer. Making my way up to the principal’s office, he connected with his friend over the internet so I would have a live image to look at, and thus teleport to. I had put myself under the influence of the hummingbird spirit, but when I said that, he just looked at me funny.

“Or, we could use a teleport ward.” He waved a ward at me.

“Oh yeah, wards. Huh.”

I found myself in a house in India.

I tried not to think about “outsourcing” jokes, and was greeted warmly by the man and his family. He asked where my luggage was, and I just gave him a little smile and pointed to my pouch, saying it was all in here. He looked doubtful, but accepted it. I gave him a gift I had made, a sunlight candle. I had mixed up some more Concrete Luminescence, then replaced the LED in a flameless candle with a blob of the stuff. I hadn’t done any alchemy in a while, it was nice to get back into it. I told them it would never burn out, just like my thanks for the training I was about to receive. They seemed to like it. The man’s name was Bahadur Mukopadhyay, which I had to try several times to pronounce. He had two children, and hoped for more, as children were very important to him. I entertained them by showing them my beaver, and making spirit clones, and showing them my dagger and how I could walk through walls. They were just astonished by all that, and my hosts were amazed as well.

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Bahadur was one of the wealthier people in his area, but even so, life there was very different. I didn't get to see much, as he spent a lot of time training me, but I did get to walk around a little. I ate their food, learned a little of their customs and values, and generally had a great time. Training was the best, of course.

The first thing Bahadur tried to do was show me my own soul's form as a forged object, but it didn't turn out so well. He said "Don't worry, this won't hurt a bit!" and put his hand on my chest, and I felt with spirit sense that he tried to do something, but nothing happened.

"Uh..." he said, and I think he was worried maybe I thought him unsuitable for teaching. I snapped my fingers.

"Does it work on people who have their souls in a container?" I asked.

"You've been through a soul transfer ritual?"

"It was done to me as a baby. It's a long story." I asked for the egg out of my pouch and showed it to him. "It's a talisman though, designed to hide the fact it's a soul container, so you probably can't get anything out of it. Well, specifically the object that's holding my soul has been wrapped in a talisman that has some special properties. My mother said she made it completely unbreakable, power dampening so you can't tell it has a soul within, and will keep me aging until I decide I'm old enough and turn that function off. She showed me how, it's quite ingenious, actually. Here, see if you can get anything out of it."

He couldn't, and looked relieved it wasn't a failure on his part making him look foolish, but just the way my soul was presently.

He explained to me that extracted souls took two basic forms, usually, depending on the nature of the person or being you were working with. People who were more angelic in nature and true angels became some sort of protection, be it a shield or piece of armor. Those more demonic in nature, true demons, or those that just liked hitting stuff were typically weapons. There was a lot of neat stuff you could do with souls, if you wanted to risk actually fighting with them. Even the souls of regular people on the street could be turned into weapons in a pinch. But before I could learn anything like that, I had to learn to appraise them. By touching someone I learned how to tell if a soul was damaged in some way, if it would be an offensive or defensive weapon when removed, and the actual form it might take if I did it.

Turns out you had to first pull the soul out of the body, which left you with a rather nebulous ball of energy in your hand. I was worried about not being good enough to practice this skill on an actual human, but Bahadur

said it was safe enough. Letting the soul go just made it go back into the body it came out of, so there was no danger of me accidentally killing anyone. Turns out the body can live quite well without the soul, which made sense. Spirit hunters forced their own souls out of their bodies regularly. Then you could apply power to the soul you were holding and turn it into something useful. At an advanced level you could store the soul inside yourself, so you could always have a favorite weapon. If you were willing to deny someone their soul, anyway. Didn't matter, I couldn't get up to that level without a lot of hard work to master the soul wielder power type. He cautioned me that, if I did one day reach that level, to only use that technique on demons. Angels didn't take to kindly to it, and neither did humans.

"Though to tell you the truth, the demons don't much care for it either, but who cares what they think anyway?"

The week passed quickly, and Bahadur was a pretty good teacher. I picked up all he could teach me with plenty of time to spare before I had to get back. He let me practice a bunch of times on himself, and finally it was time for me to return. I thanked them for having me and gave him some acceleration wards, the only other thing I really could make on short notice, just in case he ever needed to fight something. He said he would take good care of them, and I teleported myself back to school.

Africa

“Hurry boy, she’s waiting there for you!”--Toto

My boots felt a little heavier than normal as I climbed aboard the plane that was taking us to Africa. Osman was asking why we had to go to all these weird places anyway. I guess he hadn’t ever gone to school in Japan, where field trips like this are normal. Well, not field trips like this, but we often went to see certain things around Japan, which was always fun.

Christina settled in next to me on the plane, and across the row Osman was asking the very pale skinned boy sitting next to him if he was a cambion. The boy said no, he was a breath stealer, which made Osman try to edge away from him a little. I could see why he wasn’t sitting with his friends, and wondered if he had any. Who wanted to get close to someone who might go crazy and attack you if they hadn’t “fed” in several days? I knew they were potent against demons and everything but really, was having them in school such a great idea? I silently looked out the window as we took off for Africa, and thought about what we were going to go see.

Our destination was Simon’s Town in South Africa, but we would be reaching it by train after landing somewhat nearby. The readings we had done before leaving said the place was haunted, with ghosts being seen everywhere, and home to an odd picture that couldn’t be photographed. I wasn’t too keen on a haunted city, but everyone else seemed pretty excited to be leaving, and the atmosphere was a little infectious. I imagined it was more about getting a week off of school than anything else, so I didn’t fault them for it.

I had my talisman with me, packed away, and I hoped I got a chance to use it while we were there. Looking at the history of the town might be fun. I had taken a slightly greater interest in history lately, thanks to Dean’s work. That and fighting. Watching that spirit hunter girl fighting made me realize how far I had yet to go, but I still questioned if just learning to be a great fighter was worth it. What purpose did it serve just to be able to beat things up? I had thought about mastering more techniques like my spirit clone, but wasn’t sure what would be most useful to learn. Each one took a lot of time and effort to master, so was it better to become a great fighter, or practice true martial artist techniques that created a certain result? Or were

specialized fighting techniques the best thing to practice? All my teachers would tell me is “You’ll find the right balance on your own,” which did me a whole lot of good.

I had looked into it a while ago, when Dean had given me my little pep talk right before our first field trip. I had talked to my ability focused studies teacher and he said there were about twenty-nine major skills a true martial artist could master. Twenty-nine! I asked about Christina, she had maybe half that number of skills she could master, and I had seen her use, what, two? She made an energy barrier and she shot arrows at stuff. I asked Albert once how many skills he could learn, and he counted them on both hands. No wonder he was such an awesome alchemist, he had a fraction of what I had to learn to “master” my “art.” Who couldn’t do that in four years? Have you ever tried learning twenty-nine different instruments at once? That’s what it felt like I was being asked to do- either be more like Dean and just learn the basics of something and move on, satisfied, or do the opposite. Just master a few things and forget the rest. Oh, and don’t forget to keep practicing your martial arts. Wouldn’t want your actual fighting skills to get rusty while you learn to run on the ceiling or punch someone through a wall without harming the wall. It was all very frustrating.

Christina startled me out of my thoughts by looking up from the magazine she was reading. “You’re awfully quiet this morning.”

“What do you mean?”

“Usually you and Dean are talking up a storm, but now you’re just sitting there like a lump. Am I not as interesting to talk to?”

“I was just thinking about things. And yes, I do miss Dean a little, we’ve been friends ever since our first plane ride to the island, after all. It’s going to be weird not having him here. We’re roommates, we see each other all the time.”

“You see Dean almost as much as you see me- Oh,” she said, as if just thinking of something. “Someone has a crush on Dean!”

“Stop it, no I don’t. We’re just friends!”

And anyway, what would he see in me? I’m nothing special.

Osman was looking over at us, and a tiny fairy zipped in between us.

“Oh, are we talking about Dean?” Katrina asked.

“No, we’re not,” I said as Christina said “Yes, we are.”

“I will not have this conversation,” I said, turning towards the window. “Anyway,” I said, turning back. “He’s not shown the slightest interest in me, so there.”

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“That’s not something to be proud of.”

“Oh, just, you just, humph.” I turned back to the window.

“So how about you, Kat? You like looking at Dean, right?”

“He’s a cutie all right. With that big... brain... of his.”

“Does he have a big... brain?”

“He’s a problem solver.”

“I’ve noticed that. Do you notice brains more than other attributes then?”

“I am mostly spirit myself, so yes.”

“Wait, we really are talking about his brain?”

“What did you think we were talking about?”

“Okay, enough,” I said, exasperated. “Can we talk about something else? Like how do we deal with ghosts if we see one in this town we’re going to?”

“I almost wish I had spent more time practicing channeling,” said Katrina sadly.

“Why are you so hung up on Dean if you don’t like him in ‘that way’ then?”

“Christina!”

“What, I’m just asking.”

“It’s just me, okay. I was just thinking about how useless my powers are compared to his, okay? You’re the same way, what good are we?”

Christina looked seriously at me. “What do you mean, what good are we?”

“That came out wrong. You’re a spirit energist, right?”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“All you do is shoot arrows at stuff and kill things.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Wrong with it? You don’t hope for something more? I want to use my powers to help the world, but all they’re good for is beating people up. What kind of life is that?”

“Speak for yourself. I’m a spirit energist archer, from a long line of archers, and that’s good enough for me.”

“You seriously don’t want anything out of life apart from shooting stuff?”

“Like kids? Or finding out why that angel guy Osman petitioned recognized me and said I didn’t belong here?”

“I mean with powers. Helping people.”

“I am helping them. I keep them safe by shooting tiny arrows full of explosion juice at bad things, which kills them dead. I’m proud of what I am and the skills I’ve mastered. You should be too.”

“They’re just so meaningless.”

“Tell me; if Dean the Magnificent wasn’t around, would we be having this conversation? I don’t think so. You would have been just as happy as I am now to be a true martial artist and beat up demons. You see Dean learning the basics of a bunch of different powers and you got jealous of him.”

“I am not!”

“Prove it then.”

“How?”

“Schedule one of the practice rooms with him and beat him at his own game. Prove to yourself that your abilities as a true martial artist are better than his borrowed powers. He even stole your clones technique. I mean, the nerve of that guy.”

“I can’t fight him, what if I hurt him?”

“Oh, it doesn’t work like that,” cut in Katrina. “It’s all done with ES-Pers. They put you into a mental battlefield that seems real to you and lets you try out various things, but nothing happens. You basically stand there a few seconds and *blip* it’s done.”

“And you think that’s what I need to do?” I asked Christina.

“I think you need to do something to convince yourself your powers are worthwhile. Not to mention that he’s not better than you in a fight.”

“What if he is?”

“Then train harder and challenge him again. You’re Japanese, haven’t you ever watched cartoons?”

“I’ll think about it. And I’m only half Japanese.”

“The principle is the same. You better do it, or I will. We might not be great friends Yasui, but no way am I having you think he’s better than you are just because he can do a little more.”

I smiled a little. “A person who wasn’t a great friend wouldn’t care enough to bother.”

She just went back to her magazine.

“Good luck,” said Katrina close to my ear, and flew back over to Osman.

We landed in Africa a few hours later and climbed aboard a train to take us to Simon’s Town, which was about as south as you could get in

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South Africa without swimming. The countryside was beautiful, with the town nestled between the coast and the mountains. There was only a thin strip of green between the water and the mountains so the town wound like a snake down the coast, following the only road. It seemed very “American” with “Washing Well Laundry” and “The Lord Nelson Cellars” and a lot more car traffic than I would have expected. There was a large bay with a port, and several ships were docked there, probably unloading supplies or tourists. There were plenty of smaller boats there as well, and the cloudless sky turned the water a rich blue beneath them. Our destination was 66 St George’s Street, the “Simon Town Backpackers” lodge, which had been rented out for our school for the duration. After we had settled in, an assembly was called and we were given the real reason for our visit. Several teachers and older students stood watching over us, and Mrs Chadwick stood up to talk to us.

“The reason we’re here is simple,” she said. “Ghosts, but that much you know. The truth is, ghostly activity seems to be on the rise around here and that’s bad for us. The Foundation can’t spare anyone to look into such a minor matter so you guys get to do it. Find out what’s happened in this town that’s drawing ghosts here, and put a stop to it. Now remember, you’re out in public so anyone sees you using powers, you better be saving someone’s life because no other excuse is going to fly. This is an exercise in subtlety and brains, not blowing stuff up. I expect nightly reports from each team or person as to your progress, and there will be a prize awarded to the person or team that solves the mystery. Otherwise you are free to explore the town and have a little fun while you’re here. The seers here will be keeping an eye on you so don’t do anything stupid. As of now you’re all agents of the Foundation so try to act accordingly. No Mr. Weverly,” she said to a boy raising his hand, “you will not be getting a salary. Mr Nakai, if you do blow this off like you’re planning that’s fine, but there will be consequences for doing so. I advise you to think twice about it. Everyone must be back by 7:30 PM and we will be making sure you don’t go out at night. That is all.”

“Seers must have told her to say that,” said Osman, as everyone went their separate ways.

“No, you think?” sneered Christina. “They’re just going to let two hundred high school kids out onto the streets of South Africa with no supervision at all. Right. We hear the same kind of thing every time, they never learn. Come on.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about. seers get useful powers, not like us. What’s our group going to do to solve the mystery of why ghosts like this area more than ever before?”

“Don’t worry about it, we have an ace up our sleeves.”

“A what up our what?”

“What, don’t the Japanese play cards?”

“We play Shogi and Go. And Pokemon.”

“Anyway, we have our own half ghost here, no offense Katrina. I’m sure she will be able to just walk up to the nearest ghost and ask them what they’re doing here.”

“So where do we start?”

“I want a look at that weird picture we read about,” said Osman. “I’m certain it has something to do with all this.”

“You know, I don’t think this picture has anything to do with this.” Osman, Christina and I stood looking at the mural in the Residency, a museum originally built as a house. The Foundation had basically worked a deal with the town so we didn’t have to pay for things, like getting into places like this, or for bus fare. So we could move around pretty easily.

We had all spent a few minutes looking at it, and sensing it out. We had of course only started our spirit sense classes, but I had been picking it up pretty easily for once, so I felt pretty confident in that skill. It didn’t hurt that Dean and his massive amount of spirit energy wasn’t around.

Don’t think about Dean. No Dean now.

“So what do you think?” I asked.

“I think some jokester went into the Demon World, made himself some paints using supernatural materials, and then painted an unseen picture,” replied Osman. “Painted twice. Once with regular paints, for normal people to look at, once with paints rendered unseen. Because the unseen one messes up photographs, it doesn’t look like anything if you take a picture of it.”

“It would explain the reason it looks totally fine to us.”

Osman looked around, then asked quietly “How about you Kat, do you sense anything?”

“Just that the painter was howling with laughter as he or she painted it.”

“Great, now what?”

“Look around the museum a little more, see if anything jumps out at us. Something that maybe had power and now it’s gone, something that recently was activated and is drawing the ghosts here. Anything!”

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So we wandered around, and I sensed all over the place, but apart from a lot of ley lines we all came up empty. So much for day one.

We meandered the streets the next day, trying to figure out what our next step was.

“Do you think Heaven would care that all these ghosts are wandering around here?” I asked Osman.

“What ghosts,” he said, looking around. “We haven’t seen any.”

“Some of the other groups did,” said Christina. “But I didn’t hear about any breakthroughs, so I don’t think it helped anyone.”

“I’m just saying, we have to use all the powers we have if we’re going to win this thing, and petitioning is what you do. So I ask again, would Heaven care if ghosts were coming here for some reason?”

“I wonder what the prize is?” asked Christina.

“Probably not,” replied Osman. “Maybe a gift certificate to a shop in Porta?”

“Why not? Lost souls wandering around Earth, that can’t be good.”

“Gift Certificate? Please. Couldn’t you take a peek in the teachers rooms, see if it’s around somewhere?”

“Some of those souls might be bound for the Demon World, you know. In fact most of them, that’s why they’re still here. No I won’t go peeking in the teacher’s rooms!”

“So send Katrina.”

“All the more reason to send them on their way, stop dangerous spirits from walking the Earth any longer.”

“She knows right from wrong, you know. Heaven would say, ‘not our problem, find a spirit hunter, that’s why the All-Father made them’ and that would be that.”

“I just meant to imply she was a little more flexible about things than you.”

“Is Heaven really that self absorbed?”

“Just because she once implied she had watched Dean changing-”

“I am right here, you know,” said a unicorn suddenly trotting next to us.

“What, no more fairy?” asked Christina.

“Nah, time for a change. I won’t go look in the teacher’s rooms, by the way.”

“Self absorbed? Do you know the All-Father created certain angels specifically to sit around, every second, and say how great he was? That’s their entire purpose. Seems a little self absorbed to me.”

“I bet Haniel would help us.”

“We’re supposed to be figuring this out on our own. Besides, he’s off doing whatever it is he’s doing instead of watching the tree. I don’t want to bother him if he’s working on something.”

“Have you considered a mermaid?”

“Yeah, I might do that one next, that would be neat! I could swim through the air. Think I should wear a seashell bra, or go un-Disney?”

“Are we still talking about how we’re going to solve this ghost problem?”

We all stopped. “I don’t think we can,” said Christina. “Look at what we have to work with- two fighters, a person who can call on Heaven’s help, but who says they don’t care to help us, and an ESPer. Katrina’s the only one who has a shot at feeling anything out, and unless we happen upon a ghost and convince it somehow to talk to us, what exactly are we going to do? I just shoot stuff, remember, and you can’t shoot ghosts.”

“Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way,” I replied. “We’re all thinking about what our powers can do, but not about what we can do.”

“Is there a difference?”

“I think there is. Look over there.” I pointed to an older man, sitting on a bench in front of a small store, smoking a pipe.

“What?” asked Christina.

“See, that’s the real problem with shutting ourselves away on that island. We lose sight of the regular people because we think we’re better than they are.”

“I am better than that old guy, I’m pretty sure.”

“You think so? He doesn’t have anything to teach you? Nothing you could learn from a man of his experience? I think you’re wrong.” I walked over to him. “Excuse me, sir, but I’m a visitor here and I bet you could tell me all about your town.”

“So you’re saying the ghost problem has slowly been getting worse the last sixty years, but much worse just recently?” I asked after talking to him for a few minutes.

“That’s right. Town was always a little famous for that sort of thing, but now we’ve got people like yourselves, meaning no disrespect, wandering around the place hoping to catch a glimpse of something supernatural. I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“Have you seen any, yourself?”

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“Couple of times, actually. I don’t get around too much anymore, but even sitting right here I’ve seen a few. One just two days ago, standing not far from that wall over there.” He pointed to the low brick wall that rose from the buildings below. “I remember it was right there because I saw it right between that yellow house that you can just see and the taller one to the left of it.” I nodded to Osman and he crossed the street, standing where the man had pointed.

“Right here?” he yelled.

“That’s the place!” the man yelled back.

“What did it do, exactly?” asked Christina.

“Do? Didn’t do anything. Just kinda stood there, looked around I guess.”

“What did it look like?”

“Sort of a white smudge, like a white person shaped hole right there on the street. I guess that’s a ghost, right?”

“What else could it be?” I asked him.

“I can’t think of anything. Does that help you at all?”

“I guess. Apart from the ghosts, has there ever been any other weird activity in this town?”

“Not that I remember. Business as usual around here I’m afraid.”

“Okay, well, thank you for your time.”

“Weren’t no trouble. Hope you find your ghost.”

“So do I.”

“So do you feel anything?” I asked Osman, leaning out over the wall to look at the boats.

“Katrina and I both came up blank, there’s nothing here, at least not that we can feel after two days.”

“If the old man was telling the truth,” said Christina, rolling her eyes.

“We know something weird is going on here, and he had no reason to lie to us.”

“I didn’t sense any deception from him,” said Katrina.

“So we’re still no better off.”

“I think we are,” I said. “Does what he described sound like a ghost to you?”

“Not exactly.”

“That’s what I was thinking. As I recall from last years paranormal studies class, a ghost is a restless spirit. A spirit that hasn’t moved on wants something, more than anything, that only being here can satisfy. Just appearing on a

street and standing around doesn't seem like something a ghost would do. They would still be here, stuck trying to do whatever they wanted to accomplish."

"Not to mention," said Osman, "that ghosts usually look like who they were, not just a fuzzy bright spot somewhere."

"So maybe we're not dealing with ghosts, but something else."

"I suppose it's possible, but what?"

"I don't know, is there something in the water here that allows regular people to see unseen things a little, and demons are walking around? Or invisible ones?"

"No, with all the seers around here, invisible demons wouldn't stand a chance."

"Yeah, you're right. It must be something else. I have a plan, but we're going to have to split up to make it work. Christina, you and a bunch of clones are going to ask around the city, see if this guy's story checks out. Also see if we can figure out what happened a couple of weeks ago that escalated this situation. Osman, this will probably take a while, but I want you to head a little ways up the mountain and check out the area from above. See if you can see any so called ghosts, and what they look like. See if you can track one, see where it comes from, where it goes, that sort of thing. Think you can make it before dark?"

"I suppose if I'm saving a town, a koma-inu could carry me up there pretty fast. I could use extend calling so it's not too hard on me. Yeah, I could do it."

"Great. Get going, and make sure no one sees you. We'll meet back at the hotel tonight and compare notes." I stuck out my hand. "Go team!"

Christina just barked a laugh and walked off, while Osman looked like he was going to put his hand on mine but changed his mind and hurried away. "See you later?"

"Go team," I said sarcastically.

Cracks

The cracks are in the skin of the world, Doctor!

I went back to the hotel so I could have my clones leave a few minutes apart, and we started walking the town. By now the residents here had been alerted to our presence, and the stories I was hearing were getting a little out of hand. There was nothing for it, but I had to question the wisdom of the teachers in this case. Letting two hundred kids walk around a town this size asking questions about ghosts was a great way to *not be subtle about it*. Every day in our classes it was the same thing: Don't let normal people see you using powers. Be subtle about doing things. Never give a straight answer if confronted. Conceal don't feel, don't let powers show. Get an ESPer to erase memories. All that sort of stuff. But here we were, not using powers but our very presence screamed something fishy was going on. We weren't regular tourists, snapping photos, that was sure!

If you really looked at the Demongate kids, you could see they held themselves differently than other people, like martial arts masters walking around a tournament. Even just subconsciously, people with powers knew they were more capable than normal people, and it was obvious to anyone who looked at them. I suspected even I wasn't immune, after all. I alone could probably kill a majority of people in this town before they could stop me, and knowing that changes the way you act towards people. I tried to be normal and just blend in, but I think that drew even more attention to me, so I gave it up. I was a lousy actress, and could I really disguise how the hours of practice with my powers and Muay Thai made me move?

We had let almost two hundred kids like that strut around this town, and who knew what it might mean later? Oh sure, seers could make sure nothing serious happened to us, in the short term. It only took one person

getting some funny ideas about where all these kids came from and looking into it several years from now to cause trouble. Could seers predict things that far ahead? Would they even think to check?

Before long, people started stopping me and asking if I was part of that “ghost hunting group” rather than me asking them. Many of them asked me some uncomfortable questions, like what school I went to and why all these kids were running around. I gave what answers I could and tried not to stay in one place too long. I saw a lot of other kids doing the same, it didn’t seem like anyone was getting close to solving this mystery.

I wondered if maybe this was a real situation, rather than something the teachers came up with to test us, and maybe it didn’t have an easy answer. That was an unsettling thought. As far as I knew, there weren’t any more violent deaths here than anywhere else, or anything else that would produce this number of ghosts. If that’s what they were. There wasn’t anything I knew of that would draw ghosts either, usually they went about haunting people or places, trying to get their unfinished business taken care of. It was just as likely the Foundation had been looking into it in secret, got nowhere, and figured they had nothing left to lose by letting a bunch of kids look into it. Maybe they thought someone would stumble into something, or someone would come forward if they knew we were looking?

So I spent a couple hours wandering around, avoided my clones and other students, and generally kept my eyes and ears open while I walked. This was a pretty place, and I admit I slacked off a little after lunch and went down to see the penguins playing. Yes, actual penguins lived here! I figured it wasn’t cold enough for them here, but there they were on the beach, down by some really enormous rocks near the water. I did what sensing I could with spirit sense and even tried reading an aura here and there to see if there was some evil walking around the town, but no luck. Feeling discouraged I headed back to the hotel to see if Osman had seen anything important from his higher vantage point. Maybe one of my spirit clones found something, but it was a faint hope at this point.

“Hey, you’re back.” said Christina, hopping off the stool she was sitting on in our room. “Or are you another clone?”

I looked around the room, it seemed I was the last one back, my clones were already there. I dismissed them, and stood a moment, sifting through the memories of what they had done that day.

“Crap!” I said.

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“Nice to see you too.”

“Sorry Christina, it’s just my clones didn’t come up with anything useful today. One even poked around their library and asked the people there, but still nothing. Did you find anything?”

She shook her head no, and closed the book she was reading. “Don’t feel too bad, it doesn’t sound like anything’s been figured out, so there’s still time. Osman was pretty freaked out about what he saw. Now that you’re back, let’s go see what he has to say.”

We went over to his room and knocked, and he said to come in. We found him paging through a book on the Heavenly Realms, and he looked up at us.

“Great, you’re here. I saw something up in the mountains, and it’s not good. Did you girls find anything?”

We both shook our heads no, and his face fell. “I see. Well, I sketched it out, take a look.”

He slid a piece of paper over to us and we looked it over. It was a crude map of the town as seen from the mountain, but there were all these squiggly lines all over the place.

“What are these lines?” asked Christina.

“To explain that I have to tell you a little more about my eyes,” replied Osman. “You already know I can see to great distances, and I can see so well that solid objects don’t impede my vision. What you don’t know is that I can see spirit energy inside people too. In fact, I’m beginning to see the difference between what that inner power looks like, so I can actually tell just by looking at someone, what kind of powers they have. Now, the best way I can describe these lines is ‘cracks.’ Cracks in what I don’t know, but when I looked down at the town with my special vision they showed up.

“I also caught sight of a bunch of those weird figures moving about, and they just kind of wandered around without any clear purpose that I could see. They all look the same, a person sized white smudge like a distortion in the air. Stuff seemed to pass right through them, as people here didn’t pay attention to them and just went about their business. They could see them okay, because people would look right at them, but then they would go back to doing whatever. Like it was something they saw every day and didn’t care about anymore. They didn’t react to any Demongate people talking to them, as some were nearby. They seemed aware that someone was there, just not... interested.”

“Wow, I guess you can get used to anything,” I said.

“Were does that leave us?” asked Christina.

Osman shook his head. “Not much better off then before, I’m afraid. This just brings up more questions, rather than any answers. I really only have one more idea and then I’m stumped. Tomorrow if we don’t find out anything, I’ll petition a loong, or Heavenly dragon. They are very, very hard to petition so I’ll probably have to take extra time, find some Ley Lines, and exhaust myself trying to get one. It’ll be worth it if one can help, though. Chinese dragons are based on them, actually, and they are keepers of knowledge in Heaven. If they don’t know...”

“Why not just do it now, or later when it gets dark?”

“They’re huge, we’ll have to walk out to someplace no-one will see, and that’ll take a while. I’m beat from walking around that mountain, trying to figure out what these cracks were. We don’t all have Dean’s energy, you know. So we’ll have to do it tomorrow.”

“Fine with me,” said Christina. “We’ve got a couple more days here one way or the other, may as well do all we can before calling in Heaven, right?”

So the next day the three of us walked out of town to a deserted part of the coast and Osman looked around with his special vision active.

“Looks clear, I don’t see anyone spying on us,” he said. He began the ten minute ritual, which he was stretching to at least an hour. “No sense rushing it and messing it up. We’re not going anywhere today.”

So Christina and I walked a little ways down the beach while he petitioned. I was looking at shells and things, just enjoying the sunshine and the sound of the water as the gentle waves lapped near the beach. Christina was just staring off into space, probably wishing she could be practicing her archery right now, silly girl. *This is a nice place*, I thought, *with big, lazy clouds overhead and clean sand*. I wished I could take my boots off and feel it between my toes but it took a while to get them on and off, so I just left them. *Maybe tomorrow I’ll come down here without them. It’s not like I’ll get attacked around-*

Suddenly there was a shout and a thump, and we spun around to see Osman had fallen backwards and was staring into space. Christina and I looked at each other and I leapt into the air, coming down in a spray of sand in front of him. I took a defensive stance and scanned left and right, looking for what caused him to fall over. I heard him breathing heavily behind me, and when I glanced over he looked terrified, but I didn’t see anything nearby that would cause him such distress.

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“What happened?” I asked him. “What’s going on?”

“Cracks...” he managed to say, pointing ahead.

Christina ran over, then put her bow away a moment later as she looked around as well. “What are you talking about?”

Osman steadied his breathing and calmed a little, “Where I wanted the loong to appear, I was watching the space with my enhanced sight just in case. I saw a bunch of those cracks appear and stopped the ritual. They’re still there.”

“Are you saying petitioners are the cause of those cracks?”

“I don’t know what to think, but I’m sure as heck not going to try petitioning anything around this town again. Let’s head back and think about this.”

“You don’t want to stay and study them, this could be really important.”

“They give me the creeps, I don’t want to be near them if I can help it. I’ll be able to see them just fine back in the village.”

So we made our way back to the hotel, where the teachers were sitting in the lounge talking and laughing. They seemed surprised to see us back, so we went over and told them about what Osman had seen when trying to petition.

“If you don’t mind, would you watch this space right here while I summon something?” Mr Verochka, a math teacher, asked.

Osman concentrated. “I’m ready.”

Mr Verochka started making gestures and saying stuff in Russian, and suddenly a small creature appeared- a goblin.

He looked around. “What can I do for you, boss man?” he asked.

Mr Verochka looked at Osman.

He shook his head. “No cracks,” he reported.

“False alarm, sorry about that,” said Mr Verochka to the goblin.

“Eh, I wasn’t doing anything important anyway,” said the goblin. He looked around the room at all the people watching him. “That is to say, then why did you summon me, you stupid human! Don’t you know I have important business to be- are those cookies?”

Mr Verochka had taken a small package of cookies out of his pocket and handed it to the goblin.

“I guess it’s fine,” the goblin said, tearing into the package and stuffing a cookie into his mouth. He disappeared.

“I guess it’s just petitioning angels that makes these odd cracks you noticed?” he asked Osman.

“I would have to see other powers being used, like a holy chosen doing something, to tell you for sure. Can you try summoning something larger here, but not all the way? Maybe that was just too small. What I tried to petition was a bit larger than that.”

“Okay.” He started making different gestures and saying other things, for about two minutes, then stopped. Osman shook his head.

“Well, I think Mrs Nolan knows the spirit viewing technique, that’s as close as we can come to your eyes, Osman. I’ll have her take a look around when she gets back. She’s watching over the students now, so until they’re back she can’t be disturbed.”

“Do you have any idea what could be causing such a thing?”

Mr Verochka looked at the other teachers, but no one spoke up. “I’m afraid not. For now we’ll make sure everyone knows not to petition around here, but until we find the source of the problem, it’s probably going to get worse.”

We thanked him for his time and went back to our rooms, intending to pool our resources and see if we could figure anything out. We logged onto the school website, checked the books we had brought, but nothing stood out as both causing ghosts and making what Osman referred to as “cracks” in space. The problem was, only Osman’s family saw the world as he did, so really other sources of information probably wouldn’t be helpful. He texted anyone he could think of in his family, but they all said they hadn’t seen anything like that.

I had taken my boots off and set them in the corner of the room, and Christina was reading at the desk. Osman was sitting on the floor, talking softly with Katrina to see if she could remember anything from the knowledge the angel had given her about this happening before. I was laying on my stomach on the bed, reading over my paranormal studies handbook when I had a thought and looked over at Osman.

“Say, have you ever looked at what you were petitioning like you just did? Maybe those cracks are normal and you just never noticed? Maybe they just linger here for some reason, rather than fading away like normal. That energy seeping through distorts space, makes it look like people are where they aren’t, like a mirage. That’s why the ‘ghosts’ don’t seem to be doing anything, they’re people, just someplace else.”

“That’s a thought,” he answered. “Only my family has these eyes, and seers would have no reason to focus on petitioning with their senses, so

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it's possible that's just how it looks when I call on something from Heaven. I don't recall if I ever tried looking at it that way, there was no reason to. I'll be right back."

He got up and left the room, leaving me alone with Christina. I rubbed my eyes, this was getting us nowhere, and I was out of options for anything else to do. I pulled a paperback from my backpack and opened it to my bookmark.

"Giving up?" asked Christina.

"Frankly, yes. This is a job for mystics or something, not true martial artists. I've had it!"

"I have to say, I expected this yesterday, but you've really gotten into it. You kept up looking for this long, even had some good ideas. Despite all the complaining you do. I'm impressed."

"Was that a complement? I'm not sure."

"Take it as you like."

We were quiet for more than an hour until Osman returned. He looked even more disappointed than before, if that was possible.

"I just got teleported to the nearest spirit hunter base so I could petition without any normal people seeing me. The cracks just happen here. I petitioned the loong there and asked him about this situation, and they said Angels are actually looking into it too! Apparently this area interests them as well for some reason. I guess the cracks show up in the astral quite readily. I was surprised, but he said not to worry at this point, something was sure to come up."

"Well," said Christina, "it was nice of them to tell us. Still, I'm glad to see they're not just ignoring the situation. I guess that should make you feel better Yasui, if even Heaven is stumped as to what's going on."

"Actually I think I feel a little worse knowing that. If they don't know what the problem is, how are we supposed to figure it out?"

"Usually I'm the one who's the downer."

I just stuck my tongue out at her.

We spent the rest of the afternoon just hanging out. Osman went and told the teachers what he had learned from the loong, then went back to his own room. I missed Dean, and wondered if he had picked up the skills he had been sent to train in. I hoped he was doing okay, better than us at least, and wished he was here helping. I didn't mention this to Christina, of course. It was too bad, with his combination of powers he might have figured it out sooner, and been able to save the person that was killed that night.

The next day everyone was talking about the police force that was gathering in town, closing off roads and turning people away from some sort of accident site. We watched the news and apparently late last night there was some kind of explosion or something that almost demolished a house in town! Osman was staring through the wall, trying to check it out, but he said it was too far away for even him to see clearly, so we asked for permission to go check it out ourselves.

“I don’t think it’s supernatural,” said Mr Verochka. “Mrs Nolan would have picked up on it last night if it had been. You should just stay out of the way while the police handle it.”

“I have an advantage they don’t,” I protested, showing him my time gaze picture frame. “I can look into the past and see exactly what caused this. Maybe I’ll never be able to tell anyone, but don’t I owe it to anyone that died last night to make the attempt?”

He stood in thought for a moment, then called over an older boy that had come along to help the teachers out.

“You know how to make an unseen ward?” he asked. The boy nodded. “Great. Make up four and escort Yasui and her friends to the crime scene. See if she can figure out what happened last night.”

“Thank you,” I said to them both. The boy smiled, getting out his book of wards and paging through it. Less than ten minutes later the four of us walked through the police cars and under the tape towards the destroyed house. It was weird, passing beside armed cops, reporters, everyone, and they just acted like we weren’t even there. According to their eyes, we weren’t!

Even before we looked through time, we knew something odd was happening. It looked like every ghost ever in the area was here, just standing and staring at the scene. We tried talking to them, but they either couldn’t see us or just ignored us, and so we soon gave up. We turned our attention to the wreck of the house, what was left of it. It looked like something had exploded from the inside, and then caught the rest on fire, burning it out before the fire department showed up. It seemed like enough was still there that we could get past where the walls were and watch from the inside, so we did.

We knew the approximate time things started happening last night from the news, so I gave that time and started rewinding. Everyone looked on, curious what we might find out. What I saw here chilled me to the bone. We had to move several times to get the complete picture, but there was no mistake- a dreamer had lived here.

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We watched from the beginning as the nightmare scented the house and tore the front door aside like paper. Inside, an elderly woman was both sleeping upstairs and sitting downstairs on her couch, experimenting with what we knew were dreamer powers. She was changing herself into things, making objects out of nothing, and making lights dance. Seemingly trying just whatever popped into her head at the time. When the door burst open she turned and tried to fight, but she didn't really have a chance. As she lay dying, she created a bomb and detonated it, but it was impossible to see if it was the explosion that killed the creature or her death that wiped it out. I couldn't believe the nightmare's existence was tied to the lady's, after all, killing her would be suicide. It was possible it wasn't very bright, just acting on instinct. Tears were running down my face as I watched this poor woman, her face determined, as she created the explosion that killed her. I could see it in her eyes, she was willing to die to make sure this creature didn't hurt anyone else, and that's just what she did. She was a true hero, and no one but us would ever know how she struggled.

We made our way back to the hotel in shock, hardly speaking to each other.

This is the sort of thing we were supposed to prevent! I thought to myself. *What good do all these powers do us if something like this can go on right under our noses and we have no clue it's even happening?*

The teachers were concerned as we sadly walked back into the hotel, but I couldn't do more than cry as one of the teachers hugged me. Christina looked shaken up, which I didn't even think was possible. The older artificer boy told them what we had seen happen, and they asked for my picture frame to verify the story. He told them the exact time to start watching, and two of them went off with their own unseen wards. After a while I calmed down, and sat in silence until they returned, handing me back my talisman.

"Did you see all the ghosts hanging around there?" one of them asked.

"Almost like they were watching the place," said the other.

"What does it mean?" asked the first. "Do you think Sadye would know?"

"We'll have to get her down here immediately."

"Come on now, let's get you back to your rooms, you've done enough for one day, I think," said Mrs Darrington, the one who was hugging me. "Try not to dwell on it, okay? I'm sorry you had to see that. We didn't think it was anything like that, or we wouldn't have let you go. Come on." I allowed her to lead me back to the room, and I sat down heavily on the bed. Christina sat down next to me, and even held my hand, trying to comfort me a little.

We both just stared into space for at least an hour, holding hands and trying not to think about what we had seen. Finally I spoke up, quietly. "It still doesn't explain anything."

Christina sighed. "You're right, it doesn't. It must somehow be connected, but I can't figure out how. We must still be missing something, because Dreamers and ghosts and cracks in the world and Osman seeing cracks when he petitions just don't add up."

"I know one thing though."

"What's that?"

"We have to find some way of finding dreamers. Obviously there's more of them than we thought, and if they're getting killed like this it's no good. Even if the Foundation put ads on Google or something "Having odd dreams, call us." Anything!"

"Still, is the cracks thing really related to dreamers? We've got dreamers at the school, and Osman hasn't seen any cracks there."

"I don't know. I can't think right now."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I'm... I'm sorry I was hard on you about Dean. Do whatever you think is right with him. I won't fight him in your place if you say no."

"What's this all of a sudden?"

"I guess I just realized how dangerous our world really is. One minute you're sitting there, turning yourself into a duck, and the next you're blowing yourself up. I just didn't want there to be bad feelings between us."

"Oh Christina, you're weird, you know that?" I grabbed her in a big hug, and felt a little better. *No, I have to fight Dean, and anyone else I can, so I can get strong. It's all I can do, and if I'm going to protect him, I'll need to be the best I can be. There are all kinds of powers in the world, and fighting Dean will give me a taste of some of them, all used by one person. If I can beat him, maybe that's a step on the road to beating anyone.*

Nothing much happened our last day there. The teachers explained to everyone what had happened, as generally as possible, but as the mystery wasn't actually solved the prize wasn't given out. The ghosts around the burned out house dispersed and went back to normal. Sadye showed up there and poked around, but didn't find anything, herself. Our part was mentioned, but I felt it was more thanks to Dean, who had made me the talisman that showed what happened, than anything I had done. I had just brought it along, so it was kind of embarrassing. We sadly made our way

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back to the airport and took off for Demongate. The one bright spot in all this was soon seeing Dean again. I couldn't wait to tell him what we had seen, and see what he had learned. My excitement was cut short as we approached the island from the air and Osman's face drained of blood as he was looking out the window while we got closer. I expected the worst, and my fears were realized as he turned to me, a look of utter shock on his face.

“Cracks are forming around the school.”

Shields

I'm giving her all I've got, Captain!

"We have to go tell the principal right now," said Yasui. "This situation is serious and something has to be done. I don't want ghosts wandering around the school, do you?"

"Relax," replied Christina, rolling her eyes. "We only just landed a few minutes ago. Let's at least get our stuff put away. And wasn't there a certain artificer you wanted to talk to right away?"

"I do, but-

"I guess you won't have to wait long then," I said, coming out of hiding behind the building next to the "airstrip" where the plane landed. I swept my arm across myself and bowed low. "Because a certain artificer... is here." I had just gotten back myself. Teleporting back to the island timed to when the plane was landing so I could see my friends right away had worked out perfectly.

"Dean!" exclaimed Yasui, throwing her arms around me. "You jerk! We could have used you back there, you know! We have a lot to tell you." She let me go and stepped back.

"Judging by how everyone coming off the plane looks, it's not good news?" I asked, looking at the long faces of students and teachers alike, as they climbed off the plane and made their way to the busses.

She shook her head sadly. Osman looked particularly freaked out and said "It's worse than we imagined, much worse. We have to tell the principal what I saw, and it really can't wait."

"You guys are serious?" I asked, not believing them. "What exactly happened on this trip?"

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“Basically we didn’t solve the mystery, and a dreamer was killed, but that’s not all. Whatever is happening in that town is happening here, and I expect it will only get worse from now on.”

“You guys better fill me in on the way back, it sounds pretty bad.”

“It is. Come on, let’s go.”

So they filled me in as to what happened and what Osman was starting to see around the places dreamers were. I had to admit, it sounded bad. I convinced them they should at least put their suitcases in their rooms before rushing off to the principal, and they agreed. I helped, and asked about the trip apart from the ghosts and the dying and they said it was great. I was kind of sorry I missed it, but my new skills more than made up for it. I was itching to tell them about it, but felt they should take care of their stuff first. We headed back to our room and opened the door, figuring we would just put our suitcases in the room and head to the office. That plan was derailed when we saw the envelope with the silver writing on the front, left where we couldn’t miss it.

The paper seemed to be more solid, if you will, then regular old paper you find around Earth. Made of dead trees. This was made of Heaven stuff, and it showed. The letter was propped up against Osman’s lamp, on his desk, and there was luminous silver writing on the front.

To the petitioner Osman Usmanov

The writing was perfect, each letter fashioned as though it was a singular work of art.

“Well, Heaven has style, you have to give them that much,” I lamely joked.

Osman just stared at it.

“Come on, you’ve petitioned what, two things? I doubt it’s about, you know, your powers or anything,” I told Osman. I wasn’t sure how reassuring I was, after all, this could be his greatest fear come to life. “If they were taking your powers away, do you think they would be this polite about it? They’d just pull the rug out from under you, not send you this... invitation looking thing.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Osman hedged, nervously. “Can you see what it says?”

“Be glad to.” I walked over and opened the flap, drawing out a piece of stiff writing stuff that was folded over.

“Wow, you have to feel this. It even feels perfect. Weird! Guess who’s going to use some alchemy powers on this later to see what makes it-”

Osman was visibly sweating.

“Right. Sorry.” I unfolded the parchment and quickly scanned it. “You can relax, it’s just from Haniel.”

Osman breathed a sigh of relief. “Really?”

“Honest. Basically he wants us to get in touch with him again very soon. Says he learned some disturbing things in Heaven, but couldn’t do more than send this message, officially. It’s best if you petition him, rather than him getting here on his own. Probably union rules or something.”

Osman read it over himself, twice, and said we should go find the girls and get him here.

I agreed.

“What took you guys so long?” asked Christina as we walked into the girl’s dorms. “We’ve been waiting.”

“Got a message from Haniel,” I replied. “Angelic script and everything.”

“A what?”

“A piece of paper, with flowing silver letters on it, asking us to get in touch with him as soon as possible. After we talk to the principal we’ll go see what he has to say.”

“Wait, shouldn’t we do it beforehand?” asked Yasui. “He was looking into dreamers, right? And this ‘cracks’ business seems to be centered around them too. Maybe Haniel knows something that will help!”

“I guess it’s worth a try. Let’s find a spot without a lot of cracks and do it there.”

“This way,” said Osman looking around. “They seem to worsen over there, so we’ll go over here.”

Osman petitioned Haniel, again using the extend calling technique he had been practicing so it wasn’t so hard to keep him around. He must have been sitting someplace, because it looked like he was nervously tapping his leg before he spilled onto the ground. He straightened up.

“Osman, great, I’ve been waiting!” he exclaimed, dusting himself off. “I’ve got some big news for you. Dangerous news, actually.”

“I was about to say the same,” Osman said to him. “Maybe we can compare notes and figure out what’s going on.”

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He looked us over. "Are you all okay? Did something happen?"

"We're fine, it's just on our last field trip we learned some things, and we need to know how to stop it."

"Okay, you first."

"Actually, we're on our way to the principal's office, and I'd rather just tell the story once, would you mind coming with us?"

"Not at all. I haven't seen much of the human world since the gates closed. Just the tree, really. It might be interesting to see what's changed. Oh, can one of you use sending? I'd like Albert to be in on this, he'll want to know."

Katrina said that was fine, and asked him to meet us at the office, and we were on our way.

We made it to the principal's office without incident, and Mr DeLefeu welcomed us all back, and shook Haniel's hand like an old friend. They were obviously glad to see each other, as was Albert.

Osman recounted again the events that happened in South Africa, and Mr DeLefeu looked grave as he heard how the cracks were spreading here at the school now.

"I'll have our seers look around the area you said you saw the greatest number of them. I'll also caution anyone against petitioning until you can check the practice rooms out, make sure we're not making things worse without realizing it. Does what you have to say relate, Haniel?"

"I think it does," he replied, looking serious himself. "I think it may be the missing piece you spoke of, Osman, but even knowing the whole story doesn't help much."

"Tell us anyway," said Christina. "We like to be told."

"Well, Heaven has been in a kind of secret crisis mode for a while, which I was unaware of because of my duties. Your telling me about dreamers and how Christina and Yasui are here when they should be graduated by now, made me think I should look into things."

"We saw your replacement at the tree," Albert said. "He seemed, uh..."

Haniel chuckled. "Angelic? You can say it. Most angels are pretty single minded about things, I'll admit it. My time away from Heaven seems to have given me a different perspective in that regard. Anyway, I poked around Heaven and found out that the official story of why the All-Father wasn't exactly, uh, doing his job- was that He had been killed."

All of us but Albert and Mr DeLefeu gasped.

“Yeah,” said Albert. “We had asked for Heaven’s involvement in the whole Charna thing, but got shot down. No involvement from Heaven without petitioners, they said. But we had summoners and mostly demonic people on our side at the time, so no petitioner would work with us. We pressed the issue, and were told He had been ‘betrayed’ and ‘killed,’ which didn’t make much sense to us at the time. I mean, kill the All-Father? But that’s what they said! Not that they would give us any more specifics than that.”

“Well, that wasn’t actually the whole story. It wasn’t even part of the story. It was a total, bald faced lie.”

“What?”

“That’s what I said. Turns out He’s still very much alive, but not in the way we would think of it.”

“You’ll have to explain a little further,” said Mr DeLefeu, confused.

“Okay, this is going to blow your minds, so I hope you’re prepared. The All-Father is dreaming, and we’re all technically inside His dream.” He paused to let that sink in. “Basically, this entire universe is His dream, and He keeps all the natural laws and things in place. That’s why He doesn’t directly interfere with His creation anymore, He’s too busy maintaining reality to do anything but that. Before He created the universe He knew that there would be many who wanted His power for himself. So He created a barrier which keeps that power away from us, and went to ‘sleep,’ thereby starting the universe up. Now a dreamer can step from a dream into reality, right? Well, He stepped from His dream into our reality, and then made everything in the universe. Then He retreated back into his dream some time ago, and left us to our own devices. Now it’s interesting that you bring up Charna...” he looked at Albert.

“Don’t tell me!” he said, shocked.

“I’m afraid so. She found it a long time ago and tried to knock that barrier down so she could take that power. She needed holy power in order to destroy the Demon World with her moon cannon, along with Heaven and Earth, right? She didn’t manage to get the whole thing down, just minuscule holes. A molecule wide stream of power flowed out, which she collected over time. Because no one knew about it, no one checked it, and it’s been that way ever since. That power continued to leak out and has now created dreamers.”

“That does explain why dreamers only can do stuff when they’re asleep!” I said, amazed. “They’re actually touching the power of the now sleeping All-Father!”

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“It explains why they can do so much too,” said Mr DeLefeu. “Making stuff out of nothing, and with just that tiny stream of power they’re attracting? That’s amazing.”

“It also answers the mystery of where Charna’s holy power came from. We never figured that one out, after all.”

“I’m afraid it explains Osman’s cracks, too,” said Haniel. “That power that’s leaking out is crossing through the astral plane to get here, where it’s absorbed by dreamers. The longer a dreamer stays in one place soaking up power, the more cracks appear because of that constant flow of energy. Or it has something to do with actually using the power, breaking the physical laws that exist here somehow affects the world. I don’t have enough information yet to tell.”

“So they weren’t ghosts at all!” exclaimed Yasui.

“Those figures you saw? No, they were probably angels walking around the astral plane. The barrier between the two planes has weakened there just enough to let you see them.”

“Well, that’s one problem that’s solved,” said Christina grumpily. “Nice of the angels to come explain that to us when we were right there, shouting at them. Obviously they could see us just fine.”

“They probably thought you were beneath them, I’m afraid. Or not worthy enough to talk to, being “only” human. Sadly, you’re right about the other, too. At least with that dreamer dead, the power will not be attracted to that location anymore, allowing the barrier between the astral and our world to firm up again. If it does,” he added. “If the ‘leak’ is aimed at that general direction, someone else could hook into it and become a dreamer, making the problem worse.”

“So what can we do now?” I asked, concerned. “We can’t just kill all dreamers! More will be made, as that power has to go somewhere. We’ve got to patch those holes so that power stops flowing!”

“I agree,” said Haniel. “The question is how. Sadly the person that could tell us how the holes were made in the first place died trying to destroy us all in one stroke. No wonder she gathered so much power, she was trying to punch out of the dream, literally. I’d take you there to study it, but Michael didn’t much like *my* being there. I’m not sure he would go for a bunch of humans poking around. Maybe if we came up with a good plan, or things got more serious, Heaven might consider it. I’ll work on him. Albert is known to me, and you others seem to be cut of the same cloth, so he may capitulate. Heaven does know about it, and they are working on the problem. Patching a barrier made by the All-Father himself may prove beyond

even us, without knowing how she did it. Not many beings inside the dream have that kind of power. And we can't risk waking Him or poof, there goes our reality. Nor do we know how to call Him to step out from behind the shield again. It's a tricky situation."

I was looking at Albert. "Even if you did manage to analyze the substance, that doesn't tell you how to make it, or how to apply it in the form of a patch."

"It's probably some kind of energy anyway, not normal matter."

"Could a talisman be made to stop dreamers absorbing that power?"

I asked.

"Probably not," said Mr DeLefeu. "Consider our seers can't tell they're dreamers. That proves all dreamers have going for them is somehow attracting that leakage through the barrier. Take that away and they're normal people again. Whereas with our power, it's tied to our very souls, as you should now know, Dean."

I nodded.

"So how do we block or redirect a power we can't touch, or see? It's a power that's so far above us, I doubt we could do anything to influence it at all. Of course I'll try a few things, but given the hours it takes to make a single talisman, which might turn out to be useless, I don't have much hope."

"Wouldn't solve the problem anyway," I said, grimacing. "Who knows how many dreamers are out there? As it takes a dreamer to find a dreamer, how would we know who to give the talismans to? We only have a couple of dreamers here, they can't test every person on Earth!"

"For the moment," said Mr DeLefeu, "I'd like Osman to keep a close eye on the cracks, and we'll check out Sadye's classes, see if they are more serious there or not. Maybe we can keep the dreamers apart and slow down this so to speak 'corruption.' Otherwise just keep everything in the back of your mind and if you think of something, no matter how outlandish at this point, let me know. We won't find the answer to this one in books, it's a totally new situation."

Osman turned to Haniel. "I'll petition you every couple of days, if that's okay with you. Then you don't have to try and send us messages every time you need to talk to us."

"Great!"

"And I'll work on a talisman you can use to contact us with if you need to."

"Don't go to too much trouble, I doubt there would ever be an emergency on my end."

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“What can I say, I like making talismans.”

“Okay, whatever you want.”

So we all went back to our rooms to think about things. I guess they really did have a hard time with it, but at least we were on the right track now. Charna had been dead over a year now, but still her actions were causing us trouble. What other things had she done to try and end our existence that would only show up years later? I shuttered to think.

Cost of Business

Our prices are INSANE.

A couple of weeks passed, with Osman and Haniel making regular reports, which basically amounted to “nothing to report.” With all the petitioning he had been doing, he said his teacher told him he was finally ready to learn transcending, making it easier to check in with Haniel once a day without physically bringing him here every time. He had just started practicing it, so he was still petitioning Haniel on a regular basis for the moment. I was still researching the least time intensive way of communicating a simple message with him, but Osman said it wasn’t as much of a big deal now. Making two objects that were bound together didn’t seem possible, so it was back to some sort of mental link talisman, which was total overkill for this situation. Though it could be useful for me to have around in any case. I was considering making it, but hadn’t actually started any work on it. We were all sitting at lunch when Yasui suddenly asked me about the training I had gone through.

“We totally forgot to ask you about that!” she exclaimed. “What with all the stuff that happened right when we got back. So what did you learn?”

“Quite a lot about the soul,” I explained, “and the forms a real soul wielder can force it to become.”

“Wait, you can turn a soul into an object?”

“A weapon or something defensive, yes. Usually, I mean, there are always exceptions. I can also tell if the soul is damaged in some way or how much it’s ‘worth’ to a demon.”

“So if you did that to me, what would it be?” she asked, interested.

“Are you sure you want to know? The form your soul takes can be pretty revealing, you know. Your soul is what you are, in the most literal sense.”

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“You mean what kind of sword I am can tell you a lot about me?”

“You’d be surprised. But if you’re interested, I’d be happy to give it a shot.”

“Yeah, it might be fun!”

“I need the practice anyway. Okay, just give me a second.”

I gathered my energies and tried calling out my spirit projection, the beaver, because I knew with it active I would have a better chance of succeeding. It took me two tries, but he popped out and stood behind me, causing the people nearby to look over at me. As he just stood there they soon went back to eating, but I did attract the attention of the cafeteria monitor, who was now closely watching me.

“He makes it easier, it’s kind of weird. Pay him no mind,” I said to my friends who were looking at me strangely. “Normal shaman get aided by their projections as a matter of course, I have to have mine out and active to gain any benefit from it. Now, your hand if you don’t mind, Yasui.”

I took her hand and concentrated, feeling deep within her to the very force of life that gave her the powers she was always complaining weren’t very useful. I smiled, it fit her perfectly, as if there was any doubt.

“You’re a piece of armor,” I announced. “Specifically, a breastplate.”

“And so does this knowledge give you some insight into my psyche, then?”

I nodded. “It does, if you think about it.”

“What exactly does my soul being a breastplate tell you?”

I chuckled. “Let me compare everyone else’s, if they’re willing, and then maybe you’ll see it for yourself.”

Osman and Christina agreed, so I did Christina first.

“Well, that was obvious,” I said, “after all, you do wear your heart on your sleeve, so to speak.” I gestured to her bracelet with the cross that allowed her to manifest her bow.

“So she’s a bow?” asked Yasui.

“Exactly. Straightforward, efficient. It fits you perfectly, not many are that blatant, you know.”

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

“Now for you, Osman. If I’m right...” I took his hand and concentrated. “How interesting, you really are two souls in one body. I can actually feel both of them inside you, weird. You’ll be happy to know that you, Osman, are also a defensive item, like most things angelic. Specifically you are a tower shield. Good for hiding behind, slow to move around, but pretty much total protection. Interesting. Now Katrina, on the other hand, is a weapon, a very versatile weapon, a chain.”

“Is it?”

“Sure, there’s a lot of ways you could fight with a chain. Trip someone up, tie them down, use it like a whip, hold something shut. And of course she’s bound to Osman, which indicates a chain.”

“Okay, I’m somewhat convinced,” said Yasui. “But I still don’t see why mine is so special.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Remember what I said, that your manifestation is your soul. Your soul is a breastplate, meaning above all else, you want to protect. Unlike Christina here who is perfectly happy being a bow, an item used for one purpose only, or Osman’s shield, which is rather impersonal.” She still looked a little confused. “You hold a shield, but you don a breastplate. Put another way: if someone drew your soul out you would want to protect them in a very specific way- by being close to them and protecting their heart.”

Yasui turned a little red, finally getting it. “What a romantic you are,” laughed Christina. “You were right, that describes her perfectly! Speaking of that, wasn’t there something you were going to ask Dean here?”

I froze. She isn’t going to...

“I want... to fight you!” blurted Yasui.

She did- wait, what? “You want to what?”

“You heard me. I want to fight you in one of the practice rooms. One month from today, so you better get ready.”

“What’s this all of a sudden?” I asked, confused.

“It’s not actually all of a sudden,” explained Christina. “She’s been whining about her powers so I told her to hurry up and beat the crap out of you so she would know all her training is worth it. Give her something to shoot for, you know?”

“And the thing you choose to have her shoot for is- beating me up?” I asked slowly.

“What else?” said Christina with a smirk. “Seems perfectly logical to me.”

“Well, if that’s what you want,” I said to her, “Why a month from now though?”

“We have to prepare, of course. Special training, you know, all of it, the whole deal? Even Cell gave the fighters some time before his tournament in Dragon Ball Z.”

“Wow, that’s an old show. Were we even alive when it aired? I don’t think so.”

“I just heard about it, I’ve never seen it.”

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“So are you guys going to fight or not?” asked Christina.

“I already agreed,” I said, throwing my hands in the air. “One month, sure.”

“Fine,” said Yasui, biting into her sandwich.

“Hey, if you don’t mind, could you tell me what my soul looks like?” said the guy sitting behind me. Seems word had spread, so I spent the next twenty or so minutes telling people what kind of battle object their souls would translate into, which was actually kind of fun. There were some straightforward ones, like absurdly huge swords and shields to some odd ones like a tiny dart. Naturally some were more pleased to hear their solidified form than others. I noticed an odd correlation between the size of a weapon and how many friends a person seemed to have. *I’ll have to think about that later*, I thought to myself. Everyone was buzzing about it, and it was only then I wondered if the principal would be mad I revealed the existence of this power. Then I shrugged it off, he was only worried about souls being destroyed, not about people knowing the ability existed. Right?

That night while I was reading a history assignment, Katrina appeared in her old standby form, the projection and stood next to me.

“What, no fancy illusion?” I asked her.

“Osman is busy doing something, and I can only see what he sees, so I have to do it this way. I was bored, I hope you don’t mind me coming over to talk to you?”

“Not at all,” I said, interested. I hadn’t thought of it that way, she had no interest in learning history or math, what would she do with it? Plus, didn’t she replace an angel of knowledge? She probably already knew anything Osman might study. Didn’t matter, she was forced into looking at anything Osman was looking at, including homework. “Is there something on your mind?”

“I was just curious what sort of things you would do to get ready to fight Yasui, that’s all.”

“Honestly? Nothing, I don’t think.”

“What?”

“There’s really nothing for me to practice,” I explained. “All the powers I have apart from making talismans or wards I can’t ever get any better at, not without spending a month or so unlocking the full potential for them.”

“I never actually understood what that meant.”

“Oh,” I brightened. “That’s easy enough to explain. Right now I’m an artificer because my mother was one, right?” She nodded her understanding. “But my father wasn’t anything but a descendent of Cain, one of the original men the All-Father created. My dad had no innate powers, like a seer telling truth from lies, but the potential to learn many skills as though he was every classification we use around here. After he found out what he was, he got suckered into working for that devil we rescued him from.

“That devil forced him to become a full alchemist, because he wanted my father making potions and things like that for him. Basically, I could do the same- By making a concentrated effort of study on just one subject, my soul could adapt to that power and I could then learn the skills of that power normally.

“Alchemy is my next choice of powers, by the way, the things Albert can do are just too useful to ignore. Not to mention he’ll graduate at the end of this year, meaning no more alchemy stuff for me unless I do it myself! The point is, I would have to give up making talismans, learning other skills, anything like that and just focus on one kind of power in order to do it. By the time I got done the month will have gone by and I wouldn’t have time to actually improve any of those skills. There’s something else to consider too.

“Take, I don’t know, my spirit projection, the beaver. In class, real shamans manifested their projection way faster than I did, but I got there in the end. I can do it with some effort, but I can’t ever get any better. They could. That’s because I’m not a shaman myself, but my soul can, I don’t know, emulate, I guess, their abilities a little. So it takes me longer to learn a skill, but I can learn so many that it evens out. Now say I study being a shaman for a month and adapt my soul to that power? Great, right? Now I can learn to call out my projection at the normal rate other shamans can, but it took me the month just to get to that point.”

“It’s more complex than I thought, being a Cain descendent!”

“I think the drawbacks are worth it, honestly.”

“You do have a lot of abilities.”

“Which brings us back to this ‘fight’ Yasui wants to have. She could easily take me one-on-one, I have zero fighting skills. I mean I learned which end of my knife to hold, in case I needed it, but that’s about it. So it’s just going to be how she approaches me. Like how many clones she makes, and if I can find the real her before she finds the real one of me among my clones. I’ll just have to play it by ear and hope my many skills outweigh her being great at just a few, martial arts among them.”

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“Well, good luck, I’m rooting for you,” she said, fading back into Osman.

The next day was time to check in with Haniel again, so Osman petitioned him and made his “nothing to report” report. He was about to let Haniel go when suddenly he ducked his head and looked at Osman’s hand.

“Do you have a tattoo on your hand?” he asked, puzzled.

“Oh yeah, Dean made it for me because I wanted an actual weapon in case I needed it. Watch!” He looked over at the other side of the summoning room and there was an explosion of wind, making Haniel jump. “I can make it pretty big too, so I’m happy with it.”

Haniel asked to see it, and Osman showed his palm.

“You’re quite the artificer, aren’t you Dean? This is fine work.”

“Thanks. I don’t mean to brag, but... yeah, I am.”

“Oh no, not bragging at all. What else have you made?”

So I showed him. He was very impressed with everything, especially when I started pulling stuff out of the pouch at my waist. I even told him about the Time Frame, which he said he would love to see some time.

“Do you have an interest in talismans, then? Or did you want one made? I’d be happy to do it for you!”

Making something for an angel... does this count as sucking up? I thought.

“Not for myself, no. But I do know someone who might be able to benefit from a really well made talisman.”

“Someone you found during your investigation?”

“No, someone from a couple of years ago. Albert knows her. Maybe she’s okay by now, I guess we would have to ask him.”

“That’s easy to do,” I said, grabbing my phone and dialing his number. “I don’t even need more than the power of technology for- hello!”

A few minutes later Albert showed up and said hello to Haniel.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“How’s Asteraceae doing?”

“Oh.” He looked down. “The last I heard, about the same. Her powers never recovered, if that’s what you’re asking. She’s fine, physically.”

“Wait, she lost her powers?” I asked, alarmed. “I’m good, but that sounds pretty serious. What happened?”

“Well,” said Albert, “It all started on our trip to Machu Picchu.”

12

Friendship

... is magic!

“Asteraceae is an ESPer, at least she was, before all this happened. A pretty powerful one actually, given the amount of energy she had to work with. From what I can tell, even more than you, Dean, and that’s saying something!”

“I should say so.” I was intrigued, someone with more raw power to work with than me?

“We were there visiting some Inca ruins on a field trip, and little did we know on the very first night there she had been replaced with a duplicate. Apparently there’s a creature called a ‘bakeneko,’ which can replace you, take your memories and your powers, and live your life normally. Pro-tip: they cast a two tailed shadow, that’s the only way to catch them at it.”

Both Osman and I glanced over at each other’s shadows, and they were both normal.

Albert laughed. “Yeah, I was constantly checking that when we learned of this creature, but they’re pretty rare. So bakeneko takes Asteraceae and we don’t know it, allowing Charna to start draining her of dark energy. Oh right, how to explain where that came from...”

He looked thoughtful.

“Well, long story short she was feeling helpless because we were going up against a lot of nasty stuff at the time. Even with her spirit energy being what it was, she felt she wasn’t contributing enough to the group and felt she was dragging us down. Along comes this powerful demon, and says he would allow her access to a source of immense power she could draw upon at will. Against her better judgement, which was never that sound to begin with, between you and me, she took him up on the offer. Anyway, she got the energy all right, but it came with a hook. Demons, am I right?”

“It seemed positive at first, because it gave her basically unlimited energy to pull from. The catch was, that power corrupted her a little more each time she used it. It would have taken her over in the end, I guess, and made her a total slave of the demon she was connected to. We tried to break it, but honestly there wasn’t much we could do. Of course Charna out found about it and needed demonic energy to take out Heaven with her Moon

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cannon, so guess who was elected to provide it? Charna drained her for months and we never even suspected. This put a huge strain on her system and basically burned out her power. When her usefulness to Charna was done, and we got the real Asteraceae back, she was a husk, barely alive. She recovered, but everyone said her power was gone for good. She got the help of an angel who felt sorry for her a little later, but he left when she graduated, so no more ESPer powers for her.”

“I met her during the tree initiative, and we all kept in touch. I was their only Heavenly contact for a while, given how your group was mainly demonic at the time,” said Haniel, looking at Albert.

“Yeah, we were so angry with Heaven at that time. The whole planet at risk, and it was like they didn’t care!”

“We have pretty strict rules to follow, I fear.”

“Wait a second,” I said, a couple of pieces falling into place for me. “When you were talking about the power Charna used to blow up Earth, you were talking about her power?”

“Right. The original Tyrfing, the dark Asteraceae energy, and Earth power from the tree and the Heavenly energy she got from what we know now is the dream barrier. She took it all up to the Moon where she had built this huge cannon shaped talisman aimed at Earth. She was going to fire all that power at once, simultaneously destroying all the All-Father’s works in one blow. Obviously she was insane, and we stopped her, but it wasn’t easy.”

“That can’t be right. Charna made Tyrfake, why would she have needed the original? Obviously she was a good enough talisman maker to create as many of those as she wanted. She had the time.”

“You’re right. I guess I have no idea. It doesn’t make sense, now that I think about it. Maybe what she did was the limit of her ability, or the original had properties even we didn’t understand.”

“I suppose that’s possible.”

“Back to Asteraceae, I know she’d be really grateful if you could help her, and I would too! I didn’t think just a talisman could help her, we asked all around school. But if Haniel here thinks it’s possible...”

I took a deep breath. “There is one talisman I read about, a pretty complex one, that might serve. It’s a long shot though, let me find it.” We all trooped down to the library where I pulled out the talisman book I was thinking about and started paging through it. “Here we are.” I read:

“The holder becomes an ESPer as long as they carry this talisman, and can use any untrained ESPer skills as if they were a natural ESPer.

This does not allow the holder to actually learn any ESPer skills or use those that can only be used trained. The target is treated as an ESPer for all purposes.”

I tapped the book thoughtfully. “The thing is, she already was an ES-Per, and learned ESPer skills the normal way. All she lost was the ability to use spirit energy to power them, right? So would this allow her to use what she had learned before, and lost, or just basic skills as though she had never been an ESPer? I don’t actually know. It might be worth a shot, though. My teacher has said I’m the best he’s ever seen, so maybe my skills as an artificer will be enough? She’ll have to be near me while I make it, just like when I made the Time Frame for Yasui. And Katrina, if you can sync with me it would save me a couple of hours of work, as you’re a real ESPer now, which will help a lot. Given all that I’m willing to make the attempt!”

“Wow, thanks Dean,” Haniel said, smiling widely. “I’m sure she’s given up all hope at this point. This will be a nice little present to bring her, even if she only gets a little ability back. It’s too late to do it now, and we’ll have to get you permission to leave school and go see her, so shall we say tomorrow?”

We all agreed, and Haniel went back to wherever he was petitioned from.

“You’re so nice,” Katrina said to me, appearing in Illusion form.

“Practice is practice,” I said.

“Is that all this is, practice?”

“Well, I guess not.”

“Thought so.”

“You really think you can help Asteraceae?” asked Mr DeLefeu after classes the next day. I was standing in his office with Osman, Albert, and Haniel, who was currently under extend calling so he could stay around longer.

“I’m willing to try,” I said.

His eyes narrowed. “You do know that Heaven said it was hopeless.”

“And we’ve never known them to lie about anything, have we?” asked Albert.

“Point taken,” he grudgingly answered. “If anyone deserves all the help we can give, it’s that girl. That poor, messed up, girl. I assume you can make it there on your own?”

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“If Albert has seen the place she lives, I can let him teleport with hummingbird.”

“I’ve seen it plenty of times, don’t worry.”

“Actually, there’s someone who knows it better than you do, so she should probably be the one to do the actual teleport. You remember Anne, don’t you Albert?”

He slapped his forehead. “Her sister! Actually, I had forgotten all about her, don’t tell her that though. She should be in her third year now?”

“Second year, actually. You’d hardly think they were related. What with all the trouble she doesn’t get into, unlike her sister.”

Albert chuckled. “We did toe the line a bit, didn’t we?”

“I didn’t think you knew there was a line, any of you, back then.”

“Well, I can loan her my dragon talisman if she needs the spirit energy to lift us all,” I said, trying to get the conversation back on track.

Mr DeLefeu shook his head. “I’ll just give you some teleport wards. You know Dean, with all the running around you do, you should start your own club. *The Helping People Club*, or something.”

“Hey!” I said, snapping my fingers, “what a fantastic idea!”

“Of course, she’ll have to be near you while you work, and it would be easier for her to come here, rather than you going there every day. I guess we can give her an empty dorm room... Wow, Asteraceae back here, and even getting her powers back? Can the world take it?”

Albert and he both laughed, and I started to wonder what exactly I was getting myself into here. Who was this girl?

Mr DeLefeu called Anne into the office, and while we waited, Mr DeLefeu looked thoughtful. “I’ll be right back,” he said, throwing down a teleport ward of his own. We stood there, all wondering where he had gone, but he soon walked back into the room from the stairs. “We need to set up a better system for teleporting,” he said, trying to catch his breath. “Walking here from the bus loop is no fun. So many stairs...”

“Isn’t there a circle of teleportation?” I asked. “We could put some of those various places, and anyone stepping through them wouldn’t have to be redirected. Put them someplace that can be locked down fast if someone nefarious gets hold of one, and they lose their powers if they come here unauthorized.”

He looked thoughtful. “I’ll have to think about that. Anyway, here.” He handed me a ward. “You can’t use soul affecting, can you?”

I shook my head. “That requires mastering extracting, why?”

He pointed to the ward. “Had a quick word with your old teacher, he put that power into that cache ward so if you need it, you can heal her with it.”

“Ah, great!” I said, sticking it in my pouch. “I’ll check her soul out first thing, then.”

“We should have done that, but you know how I felt about that power. Maybe this can make up for it a little.” He sounded wistful, and went to sit back down again. Not long after that a young summoner girl walked in. I noticed she had a ton of freckles, red hair, and a bit of a vacant expression. She seemed nice enough though, and readily agreed to be our resident teleporter.

She was handed some wards and he explained how to use them, which she said was no problem. We stepped through the ward to find ourselves in front of a farm, which Haniel said was in Ireland. There were sheep everywhere, and a lot of grazing land as far as I could see. Rolling hills and puffy clouds dominated the landscape, and the smell of sheep was heavy in the air. It was cool, but not uncomfortably so, and a slight breeze ruffled my hair. This place seemed pretty peaceful, hardly the birthplace of this “poor, messed up girl” I had been hearing about. Albert went up to the door and knocked, wearing a little smile. He was no doubt happy to see his friend again, especially as he was bringing her good news. The door opened and a red headed lady looked out. “Yes?” she said.

“What are you doing home, Anne-” she started to say, then recognized Albert, and threw the door open wide.

“Albert, it’s you! Oh, I’m so happy to see you again!” She swept Albert up into an embrace, holding him tight.

“It’s nice to see you too, Mrs Callaghan.”

“Who are your friends? I don’t think I recognize them.”

“This is Dean, the angel Haniel, and Osman who brought Haniel with us.”

“Oh, are you all friends of Asteraceae’s? It’s nice to meet you. I don’t recall her mentioning a Dean, but you’re welcome to come in.”

“Actually,” I said, stepping past her as she held the door open for us, “I’m here to hopefully get her powers back. And it’s nice to meet you too.”

Mrs Callaghan gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. “Is that even possible? She said, I mean, she was so sure...”

“That’s what I’m here to find out,” I said, simply.

“I’ll go find her, you boys have a seat. You don’t know what that would do to her. She just hasn’t been the same since she came back from school, you know? She just mopes about, even today, like she lost an arm or something. That nice man, Martin DeVille, you know him, right? The

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man with the yellow eyes and white hair? He stops by all the time trying to cheer her up, but it doesn't seem to help. He hasn't given up though, I think."

I tried to imagine living without my powers, and shuddered. "From what I heard, losing an arm would have been preferable, rather than what she went through."

"She... never said much about it. I do so hope you can help her. Wait right here."

We all sat in the living room and waited for her to return. "She seems nice," Osman said, trying to fill the silence.

"What exactly are you going to do?" asked Anne. "You're just a kid like me, how can you hope to cure her when Foundation people couldn't?"

"It's only speculation at this point. I'm hoping time, and a combination of techniques."

We heard a door open, and a large man came in the room, wiping his hands on a rag.

"Are you still trying to get that tractor to work, dad?" asked Anne.

"There's my little girl!" said the man, picking Anne up and spinning her around. "You mother said you were here, but I couldn't believe it!"

"Daddy!" Anne shrieked, "put me down!"

He gave a hearty laugh and set her down. "You've gotten bigger."

"It wasn't that long ago I left!"

"No? It seems that way, the house is pretty quiet without you and your sister fighting all the time."

"Dad!" she protested again.

"So," he said, turning to us. "I recognize you, Albert, that leaves two. Which one of you fine boys is going to cure my daughter?"

I stood up. "I'm going to attempt to cure your daughter, sir."

He grabbed my hand in a crushing grip. "Nice to meet you. I'm Beacan Callaghan."

"Dean Chesterfield," I said to him, "And this is Osman Usmanov, my roommate."

"Good to meet you too," he said, shaking Osman's hand as well.

"Staying out of trouble, are we Albert?" he asked, with another handshake.

"As much as I can," answered Albert.

"That's the spirit!"

There was a pounding down steps, and Mrs Callaghan and a very attractive young woman came into the room, and we all got up. Asteraceae didn't say a word, just went over to Albert and hugged him, then stepped back. "Nice of you to finally come visit your old friend," she finally said, punching his arm. "So who are your other friends? I recognize Haniel, of course, from the tree."

“This is Osman, the petitioner who lets me walk around Earth again, and Dean, he’s the one who we hope can get you your powers back.”

“Nice to meet you, but I hope you’re a little more confident than he is.”

“I normally exude confidence from every pore, but this is going to be tricky any way you look at it. We have a solution, and while it might restore your abilities totally, it might only give you part of them back, or it might do nothing. We’re going to have to try it and see.”

“It’s not dangerous?” asked Mr Callaghan, concerned.

“No,” I answered immediately. “If it doesn’t work, there’s no harm done. And she has a pretty tattoo to show off.”

“I see,” said Asteraceae. “So you’re an artificer?” she asked me.

“Among other things,” I answered slyly.

“What other things?”

“He’s a Cain descendent,” answered Haniel. “Like Toby, who helped us out at the tree. You remember him, right?”

“Who?”

“What about Yasui, the true martial artist with the boots? Or Christina, the spirit energist with the bow?”

She shook her head no, and we all looked at each other, worried.

“Should I have? Has my memory been affected too?”

“No, something weird is going on we haven’t made any progress on, it’s a long story. I wonder if a dreamer- Never mind.”

“Well, I remember meeting Cain, he helped us out that one time. You’re his descendent, huh?”

“From my father’s side. I’m only a second year student, but I’ve learned a little about a whole bunch of useful skills, which will hopefully help me cure you.”

“Let’s get started then, why are we just standing around here talking for?”

“If you’ll just lay down, I’d first like to check out your soul.”

“Do I have to take my clothes off, doctor?” she said with a wink.

I reddened. “It’s not customary, but if it makes you more comfortable... No, but I may have to physically pull your soul from your body to look it over, and possibly heal it if there’s damage. I suspect that’s the case. Please don’t fight me on it, or I’ll never be able to do it. I learned the technique to fight against vessels if I ever saw one, and they can’t resist this. I think. You instinctively will, but you can choose to let me do it if you want.”

“And this is the not dangerous part?”

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“It’s fine, if I so much as lose my grip on it, a soul goes instantly back into its ‘container,’ in this case, you. It’s perfectly safe, I’ve done it during practice.”

She wiggled around, getting comfortable, and closed her eyes. “Whatever you have to do, just get me my powers back.”

“Okay,” I said, putting my hands on her stomach. “Here we go.”

“I would prefer you leave that soul where it is,” a strange voice said from behind us, “it does belong to me, after all.”

Mrs Callaghan screamed, Mr Callaghan protectively shoved his daughter behind him. I turned my head to see Albert whip Tyrfake, which he had with him always, out faster than my eye could follow and smoothly bring it to a halt at the demon’s neck. On the other side of him Haniel had done the same with his sword, which was covered in white flames. I’ve talked about meeting devils before, but the figure that now stood in the living room can only be described as the Devil. Red skin, horns, bald, crisp business suit, forked tail, the whole works. He threw back his head and laughed.

“A mere alchemist and a lowly angel, threatening me of all demons, with their little swords? You really have a high opinion of yourselves.”

The steel in Albert’s voice was unmistakable. “Take another look.”

The Devil glanced down at the swords, then over at Haniel. He smiled. “Ah, of course. That sword and the angel’s there may, I say may, just hurt me. But come now, all I want is what’s mine, and she did give herself to me, after all.”

Albert didn’t move an inch. “You lost all claim to her when we came to you for help to track her down, and what was it you said? The person that stole the power you gave her would make an excellent servant in her place? I believe those were your exact words?”

“Did I say something so foolish?” the demon asked.

“Yes, you did. And how did that work out for you, if I might ask.”

“You know full well what she tried to do with my power.”

“And did you learn something from the experience, then? Like maybe when someone asks you for help, and tells you about a misuse of your power, you listen to them rather than blowing them off?”

“How dare you speak to me like this?”

“I never was very bright.”

The demon looked him over, then chuckled. “No, you never were. One last chance, my dear,” he said to Asteraceae. “This hope you have that

you can get your powers back- only I can guarantee you what you need. You've tasted it before, and it can be yours again."

"Leave me alone. It's your fault my powers were lost in the first place."

"They helped you out a time or two, I think. But that's fine, you'll come crying to me in the end. They always do."

He vanished again, and Haniel hesitantly lowered his sword and looked around. Mrs Callaghan was holding on to a chair, looking like she was about to collapse, and Mr Callaghan went over to her and helped her sit down. Anne looked more determined than scared, but I didn't know her well enough to say for sure.

"He must have been watching you the whole time, or somehow rigged the house to let him know when people with powers came in," said Albert, disgustedly. "Let's hope that's the end of it."

"Was that who I thought it was?" asked Osman, quietly.

"Yes, it was. Sorry about the interruption, I had no idea he would show up like that."

"You and me both!" said Asteraceae. "Can you say *stalker*?"

"Is there some way to keep him out?" asked Mrs Callaghan quietly.

Haniel shook his head. "He's the most powerful demon alive, there's nothing we can do but hope he ignores you now that Asteraceae's refused him again. Sorry."

"What did he mean, you made a deal with him?" she asked Asteraceae.

"I don't want to talk about it, mom." She laid back down and closed her eyes. "Let's do this."

I looked around, and Albert put his sword away, so I shrugged and turned back to her. I placed my hands on her stomach again and concentrated, trying to see if I would find damage in her soul. I was successful, and yes, her soul was quite damaged, as I expected.

"It's damaged," I said softly. "I'm going to extract it now, please allow me to do so, which will let me heal it." She nodded, and I focused my energy with spirit manipulation, not yet wanting to draw upon my dragon talisman unless I had to. By my calculations I spent almost as much energy as Osman had, total, and thanked whoever it was that had blessed me with an abundance of the stuff. I made a grabbing motion and pulled Asteraceae's soul from her body. She went limp.

"Is she okay?" Mrs Callaghan asked, concerned.

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“She’s fine,” I said, looking the soul over. “Having your soul pulled out is a bit of a shock, and while mastery of the skill would let me keep someone conscious, at this point she’s out of it until I finish this.”

The soul was badly damaged. Where normally the soul was a swirling ball of light, this one seemed almost burned, and hung there limply, hardly moving. I shook my head, how could someone do this to another soul? Without letting go of the soul I reached into my pouch and drew out the ward.

“This has the power to heal her,” I said, knowing they would be curious. “I just hope my old teacher was as good as he claimed.” I activated it, which made it glow and slowly heal the hardly moving soul I carefully held in my hand.

By the time I was done, the soul seemed much bigger and brighter, almost normal, now moving and swirling much like it should. Both Mr and Mrs Callaghan were gently crying, holding Anne and watching me work.

“It’s so beautiful,” she said, awed. “Do we all look like that?”

“We do,” I assured her. “I wish I could let you hold it, but you don’t really know how, so...”

“That’s okay. Just to see my daughter’s soul. It’s so... amazing!”

“I hate to say this, but it still doesn’t seem quite right,” said Osman, peering at it intently.

I wonder what he sees when he looks at it?

“I know. Either it’s damaged beyond help or the guy who trained me is not skilled enough to totally repair it- her. Or it’s damaged more then one session can heal. I’ve healed her as far as I can, which is sure to help. I’ll put it back now, see if that’s all she needed. I doubt it, however. She can be looked over by the guy who trained me before we do the talisman. He can make sure it’s as healed as it can be.”

I gently laid the soul back on top of her, and released it, watching it sink back into her. We all waited until suddenly Asteraceae opened her eyes and stretched.

“Oh, hello.” she said. “What’s everyone staring at?”

“How do you feel?” asked Mr Callaghan.

“Better than I have in a long time, actually. I can’t explain it, but you’ve done something, that’s for sure. Now to see if I have my powers back.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, that’s step two,” I cautioned her. She stared at one of the cushions on the couch, but whatever she was doing, it didn’t happen. She shook her head.

“I didn’t think it would be that easy. I just figured, after hearing your

story, that I better check for soul damage before anything else. That was just a bonus. The plan is to make you a talisman tattoo that brings back at least some, if not all, of the powers you had before you lost them. Like the one I made for Osman here, that gives him a pretty impressive wind attack.” He showed his hand. “You won’t be able to learn anything new, because this method hinges on your being an ESPer before your loss of ability. The way I see it, some powers are better than none! And if there’s one skill you really can’t live without, we can make you another one to enhance just that.”

“That’s for sure. What do I have to do?”

“Come with me and live at the dorms for a few weeks. I’ve already cleared it with Mr DeLefeu, so it’s fine. While I’m working on the talisman you’ll have to be there, and it’ll take me two and a half weeks of work, two hours a day. Naturally I’ll try to get it done sooner, but I have classes to work on, so I can only do so much.”

“That’s fine, a couple of weeks there is okay. I don’t mind tutoring you, if it’ll help. If this is all okay with you, mom and dad?” She smiled as she asked, and her parent’s eyes lit up.

“To get your powers back and you back to your old self? Sure.”

“I’ll go pack some stuff, be right down!” She ran up the stairs.

Mrs Callaghan watched her, smiling. “My daughter is smiling again, thanks to you. Even if this fails, you’ve healed my daughter’s soul, and that means so much to us.”

“I never imagined the difference in her soul could be so striking, but there it was,” said her father. “No wonder she wouldn’t talk about what happened. Like my wife said, just to see her smile again is more than I could have hoped for. We’re in your debt.”

“I’m just glad I could help,” I said, embarrassed.

Helping People Club, huh?

One More Thing

“I see your true colors, shining through.”--Cyndi Lauper

Moments later Asteraceae came back with a suitcase and said she was ready to go. Haniel told Osman to release him back to Heaven, saying it was silly to teleport him back to the school, only to release him there. We said our goodbyes and each promised to keep looking into things. I promised to have Osman get him back when the talisman was ready, and he wished both of us good luck. Asteraceae said a cheerful goodbye to her parents, and Anne threw down the teleport ward, which we walked through. We found ourselves standing in front of the school.

“I’ll take you to see the principal,” said Anne, “so we can see what room they’ve put you in.”

She was looking around wistfully. “I’m back,” she said quietly. “How about that?” She shook her head. “I know where the office is, Anne, I can get there myself.”

“Excuse me, I thought you might want to spend a little time with your sister, but if you want to just go your own way...”

“Oh, sure, I mean, sorry, we can walk together. You can tell me all about how your year is going. The stuff you don’t tell mom and dad, I mean, because I know there’s stuff. When and where should I find you, Dean?”

“Look for me in the cafeteria at six, I’ll try to have my homework done by then and ready to start work on your talisman.”

“Okay then, six it is! See you!” She gave a little wave and started walking away.

Anne looked back and forth between her sister and me. “She is getting back to her old self, I don’t believe it. Dean, I don’t know who you are, but... thanks.”

She ran off after Asteraceae, and the two of them started chatting. I was left standing there with Osman.

“I might actually pull this off, you know?”

“I hope so. They seem to be counting on it.”

“Good thing talismans are my main focus. I’m sure I can do this.”

“If anyone can, it’s you,” he admitted.

“So, how does one start a club, anyway?” I asked with a grin.

The two weeks it took me to make the talisman passed normally, with Asteraceae hanging around our room as I worked. Her sister also stopped by, and with Yasui there it did get a little noisy. I didn’t mind all these cute girls hanging out here, but I did notice Yasui wasn’t her usual cheerful self. She seemed a little down, and slower to laugh. She stared off into space more than usual, which worried me a little. I didn’t get a chance to talk to her about it, but figured it was either a little jealousy about Asteraceae hanging around or nerves because of our upcoming “fight.” I figured once this was done, things would go back to normal.

I had the principal check my work over once again, though I was pretty confident I had gotten it exactly right. He said to hold off until the next day to actually apply it, and kept it overnight to study in more detail. The next day he pronounced it workable, and we went down to a classroom to apply it. In total we had myself, Osman, Yasui, Haniel, the principal, Albert, a couple of other teachers, her sister, and a pale man who came in especially for the occasion. He called me aside before we started and introduced himself.

“I’m Martin DeVille. Lucien has told me some good things about you.” He held out his hand for me to shake, which I did. I instinctively took a peak at his soul, and found to my shock he didn’t have one!

“It’s an honor to meet you, Mr DeVille. You’re in charge of the Foundation, aren’t you?”

He nodded. “For the moment. The senior positions are being filled, but I still have seniority over everyone.”

“Still? Though I suppose we’re all still on the track of fixing stuff Charna mucked around with, actually.”

“And your contributions aren’t going unnoticed, let me tell you. We could use someone of your talents and versatility in our ranks, if you’re interested once you graduate.”

“You’re offering me a job?” I was amazed.

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“Like I said, Lucien and your teachers say your talent for talismans is unmatched, and you can do a lot of other things too. I would be remiss in my responsibilities if I didn’t at least make some effort to recruit you!”

“Wow.” I was a bit taken aback. “I will keep that in mind, sir. Thank you for the offer.”

He nodded, then looked over at Asteraceae, obviously eager to get started. “She’s more animated than I’ve seen her in a long time. Even if this doesn’t work, I think you’ve given her some life back with what you did. Thank you.”

“Just doing what I can.” I paused. “If I’m not overstepping my bounds a little, may I ask why you don’t have a soul?”

“Noticed that, did you? I’m a breath stealer, a very old one. Asteraceae and I go way, way back, so…” he trailed off. “Anyway, good luck!”

We went over to her, and I dug the paper with the tattoo on it out of my pouch.

“Are you ready for this?” I asked, excited.

“I sure am!” she replied.

“Okay.” I held it up. “Where do you want it?”

She turned around and took off her jacket, revealing a half shirt that tied at the back. She tried pointing, and I walked over to her.

“Here?” I said, placing it in the center of her back.

“More to the right.”

I got it in place and put my hand over it, taking a deep breath. “Here we go,” I said, activating it.

The power flowed through me, into the paper, and then into her. When I pulled the paper away it was blank, and she had a tattoo on her back just as I had planned. I stepped back, hopeful.

“It’s done,” I said. “Give it a try.”

She concentrated, then I felt her put more energy into it, and she disappeared with a POP and reappeared on the other side of the room.

She gave a whoop and started dancing around, saying “It worked, he did it, I’m an ESPer again.”

Mr DeVille ran over and hugged her, while various people started shaking my hand, congratulating me. We soon got that all sorted out and Asteraceae floated over to me.

“I have to tell you, it takes a lot more effort than I remember it taking me to do this kind of stuff,” she said. “Not that I’m ungrateful,” she hurriedly went on. “I was just wondering if that would always be the case or not?”

I shrugged. “Just it working at all and getting you this far is the best possible result,” I explained. “Your powers may get easier with time as your body adjusts, it’s hard to say. This has never really been done before, you know?”

“Well, thanks a lot. If you ever need me for something, just let me know, okay?”

I nodded. “Okay.”

Asteraceae left with Mr DeVille, she wanted to get back to see her parents right away, and as she could get herself back now, my job was done. But there was still one thing I needed to talk to Haniel and Mr DeLefeu about.

“Right,” I said to them, after calling them aside. “So now you can tell me why someone from the Foundation didn’t do that years ago? As obviously it worked. I’m good, but I’m still a second year student. There must be better artificers than me!”

“You have to understand,” said Mr DeLefeu, “we really did talk to angels about it, and they said it was gone, and couldn’t be recovered. How silly of us to take what they said at face value.” He sighed. “It’s partially my fault, as well. My prejudice against soul wielders blinded me against consulting one, and poor Asteraceae paid for it. I guess I’m going to have to think long and hard about having them at school- you’ve proven how useful the techniques they use can be. I just don’t like the thought of giving a bunch of thirteen year olds power over people’s souls. You did good, Dean, and opened my eyes a little. Thank you.”

“There is another reason we didn’t try too hard,” said Albert. “Asteraceae herself. I didn’t realize the damage to her soul was so bad, but after she lost her powers, she changed. She didn’t really try to get them back, not that I saw. She could have gone to various people, talked to world class artificers, whatever. Instead she just kind of moped around, and talked about leaving school because she was so useless. In hindsight I realize that was her damaged soul talking, but...” he glared over at Mr DeLefeu, “I didn’t know the soul could be removed and healed at the time, either.”

“I am really sorry, Albert. You do understand my concerns about using souls as weapons in battle though, right?”

He nodded. “I don’t blame you. I could have done more, but I was busy with my own stuff at the time, and figured she would snap out of it on her own. I guess she never did. We all failed her a little, so don’t feel too bad about it. She seems okay now, and that’s what counts. Heck, a couple of years without her powers might have done her some good, anyway.”

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“Remember that time she teleported into the middle of an office building? In broad daylight?”

“Oh man, that caused us so many problems,” said Albert, laughing and rolling his eyes.

“Which, again, turned out okay in the end.”

“Funny how that works.”

“What are you guys talking about?” I asked.

“Just the crazy stuff we went through at school,” replied Albert. “Trust me, you’re better off not knowing.”

After that the meeting quickly broke up and Asteraceae went home again, now ready to contemplate her future a little more now that she had her powers back, at least somewhat. She said she liked raising sheep, but everything was a little easier with ESPer powers, so maybe that wasn’t in her future after all. That left about two weeks until my “fight” with Yasui, who didn’t seem to return to normal like I hoped. I asked her about it a couple of times, but she just brushed it off and said she was fine. I didn’t want to push too much, but she was my friend, so I was a little worried. Finally the day came, and we went down to the practice room at our allotted time and met with the ESPer who was going to hook us together.

“So you know how this works?” he asked us.

“You meld us together into a battlefield, and we go at it,” I said.

“A primitive but accurate description. What kind of battlefield would you like? I can create desert, swamp, forest, the Moon-”

“Can you give us the Moon for like ten minutes, then switch us over to a forest, maybe a couple hundred meters apart?”

Both he and Yasui looked at me funny, but he said, “Not exactly ten minutes, but I could give you a little time. I won’t be there with you, I’ll be maintaining the meld. I’ll try to judge it accurately.”

I nodded. “Thanks. Watch this for me, will you?” I asked, setting my dragon talisman on the ground.

“You’re not using it?” asked Yasui, shocked.

“It wouldn’t be fair. You don’t get any advantages like this, so to be fair neither should I. Whoever wins, it’s because of their own efforts, not because of something cheap like having six times as much energy as the other person.”

“You legitimately made it. It’s part of your abilities as an artificer,” she protested.

“True, and I wouldn’t mind cheating, so to speak, if my life was in danger. In this case, however, let’s just use our own strength. I’m using all my other talismans, after all, so you still have plenty to worry about.”

“You’re a good guy, you know that?”

“Thanks. We’re ready.”

Our host put his hands on our heads, and I suddenly found myself standing on the Moon.

“Nice detail,” I said, looking around.

“Now, why are we here?”

“You’re going to tell me what’s been bugging you the last month. It can’t be this fight we’re about to have, so spill it.”

“Like I told you before, it’s nothing.”

I crossed my arms. “Not buying it, sorry. It must be something, and I want to help. As fake president of the yet to be incorporated Helping People Club it’s my duty, in fact. Talk to me now, or I’ll beat it out of you in nine minutes.”

She smiled a little. “You think you can, huh?”

I just looked at her.

“Okay, fine, I’ve just been thinking about what Haniel said when we got back from Africa, that’s all.”

“What, about the All-Father being asleep?”

“Yes, I can’t believe that doesn’t bother you! According to him we’re just puffs of smoke running around some dream the All-Father is having. Why should we do anything, nothing matters if that’s true.”

“That’s the key right there, isn’t it? If it’s true. Personally, I don’t believe a word of it.”

“What?”

“This was really all that’s been bothering you? I don’t want you holding out on me now.”

“Yes, this is what’s been bothering me, now why do you say you don’t believe it?”

“Because of the source. Look, let’s walk through this logically, okay?”

She nodded.

“Good. Rewind to several years ago: Albert and company are dealing with a situation that involves the Heavens. They ask “what’s going on?” and the answer they get back is “the All-Father was killed by a traitor in Heaven.” Albert and company says “No way, that’s impossible, how can the All-Father die, yadda yadda.” The point is, the story they were told fit

the available facts- as Haniel knew them. End of story? For him, yes. But the fact remains, they were told something they could accept that led to the result Heaven wanted, without angels getting involved. They let Albert and his friends do all the work, rather than involving themselves. Love to know how that one played out. Now, fast forward to Dean and Company. You're with me so far, right?"

She nodded again.

"Okay. Once again, Heaven has a situation they would like taken care of. Us poor mortal saps come along, and again we're told a story that seems to fit the available facts. Dreamers exist, their power comes from the All-Father, He's asleep behind a shield of His own creation. Is that the whole story, or even part of it? I think not. Haniel is just relaying information given to him by other angels, *who have lied to him before this*.

"They told Asteraceae her powers were gone for good, probably to punish her for whatever the deal was she made with that demon. So we know they're not above punishing people, and lying to protect themselves. How do we know they didn't get tired of him bossing them around and made that shield themselves to lock him away? Or maybe he was somehow killed, and his power is all that remains behind, locked away beyond that barrier. We don't know for sure, that's the thing.

"So I choose to believe that, yes, this barrier exists, because I've seen the effects of it. If all that power got loose, and everyone became a dreamer, it would be catastrophic for the world as we know it. So does it need to be sealed off again before the cracks get bigger, or more people die at the hands of their own nightmares made real? Absolutely.

"Do I think I'm a dream, just because some angel says so? How does he know? Angels came around later, remember, so maybe they're just guessing themselves based on sketchy evidence. Most of them aren't that much smarter than us, you know? They probably couldn't really comprehend a being that could create our whole universe out of nothing any better than we could. And I'll tell you one other thing."

She waited. I stalked over and grabbed her hands, putting her fingers through mine and holding them both up, our palms together. I looked her straight in the eye.

"Feel that? We're real Yasui. It doesn't matter if we're real inside a computer simulation run by aliens, or we're a dream, or chained to a cave wall or we're just a probability equation propagating through eleven dimensions. What we do matters here, in this time, and this place. Whatever

that “time” and that “place” happen to be made of, who cares if we’re just numbers being looked at by aliens or whatever? Let’s show them what we’re really made of. What we can do if we put our minds to it. Agreed?”

She dropped her gaze, then smiled as she looked back up at me. “Agreed,” she said.

“And next time, talk to me about this sort of thing so I can snap you out of it, and you don’t spend weeks feeling miserable, okay?” She nodded, and I let her hands go. “So are we going to do this thing?” I asked.

“You better believe it.”

We both turned and looked up at the Earth, hanging in space, and looking close enough to reach out and touch. Yasui took my hand again and we just stood there, taking in the stars and the Earth until I found myself staring at a blue sky, trees all around me.

“Game on,” I said.

Fighting Friends

*“The wheel of fate is turning.
Action!”*--Blazblue

I have a confession to make: I changed my mind a few days after I told Katrina I wouldn't be doing anything to prepare for my little tournament. In truth, I didn't do anything physical to prepare, like lifting weights or anything. I used my powers, as that's what they were there for. After all, I reasoned, didn't I have my pride as an artificer? I did indeed, I answered myself, so in my ability focused studies class I switched over to making wards and learning a couple of new ones. I also brewed up some simple alchemy formulas and put one of my new wards to use carrying them. I had to make a bunch of batches, because honestly I had less than a fifty percent chance of getting it right at the end, so I felt it was better to have too much than not enough.

Alchemy of this sort was more like cooking, following a recipe and at the end, putting some spirit energy into the creation to activate it. I could follow the recipe to the letter, but because my soul wasn't yet attuned to the true powers of the alchemist, I could mess that part up at the end. That's why I had Albert make my sunlight knife before. I didn't want to ask him to help me with this stuff, I wanted to do it all on my own.

The first ward I learned to make was the contain ward. Normally I would just rely on my pouch to carry stuff around, but this worked a little differently. Sticking it to something would store it “inside” and allow someone to take it out at any time. Or it could be released when the ward was destroyed. Had to be careful with that one, given how easily paper could be torn!

What made the contain ward worthwhile was how they differed: stuff I could put into the pouch was determined by the weight of the object, while the contain ward was all about the size of the object. It didn't matter how much it weighed. By combining the two I could pretty much carry any object, anywhere! I had some traps in mind based on the property of the ward to release the object if it was destroyed, I just hoped they worked.

The second ward I studied was the conjure ward, which basically turned the ward into a simple object for a couple of minutes. It could make anything that was all one piece, like a brick or a rope. So I could get eleven pounds of rope or a bowling ball that weighed that much.

Naturally, all this ward making improved my skill at making them in general, and I revisited my acceleration ward and noticed some mistakes I had made. I chucked all of them and remade them, to great effect.

Now the conjure ward was a bit tricky- you had to decide what sort of object you wanted from it as you made it, rather than when it was activated. This seemed like a lot of hassle to go through to get a ghostly replica of an object for a few minutes, but in this case it would probably serve my purposes. Forget doing that in the middle of a battle, so you either needed to have hundreds of the things made with every possible object you could think of, or just forget that one when you didn't have a lot of time on your hands. I sat and made a bunch of them with objects I thought might come in handy, and a couple specifically for our fight to use as traps. Contain was far easier, you just stuck it to something, and that thing got sucked in without any fuss. That was the problem though, did I want to get close to Yasui?

To fully spring the traps I had in mind I needed a way to activate wards from a distance, basically laying them out where I wanted them and activating them on demand. Luckily for me there was a way to not only do just that, but let me activate a ward like my acceleration ward without putting it on someone. This of course only lasted a little while, unlike the regular way of doing things, where it worked until someone took it off. I didn't think that would come in very handy at first, but for traps it was essential. I walked around for days until it finally hit me- being able to activate a ward in my hand, but have the affect of the ward happen over there, turned me into a sort of magic user. *Like making an explosion from an explode ward go off over there, without having to throw the thing or set it on a timer. Maybe learning more wards wouldn't be such a bad thing.*

I only had so much time, so that was something to think about for another day. I had to stick to what I knew, and so my plan was a devious one. I knew I couldn't take Yasui in a hand to boot fight. I also guessed that she, like me, would probably use spirit clones to muddle me up. I could energy blast the clones, but then Yasui would get that energy back, and be more prepared the next time. My idea was to distract or trap her somehow, then get her with a contain ward, trapping her. That way she would lose the energy, and also wonder where the heck her clones went and why they weren't helping her! I hoped this would work, as she was a very close up fighter. I guessed she would just charge straight in at me, letting me trigger the traps at the right time.

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Finding myself in the forest I dodged behind a tree and listened. Nothing.

Good, I thought to myself, we're apart, I'll need some time to get ready.

My first step was to get as fast as possible, to try and counter Yasui's speed. I pulled a flask of ameliorating medicament out of my pouch and drank it down. Limey! This boosted my reflexes by only a small amount, but every little bit helped. I then grabbed an accelerate ward and stuck it to my chest, under my shirt. My fingers were a little blurry as I looked at them, so that was working fine. I activated my armor, another item a lesser man might see as cheating, as it made me nearly impervious to attack. However, in theory she could get through it with a well placed strike, so it wasn't foolproof. Now for the bait, and the longest part of my prep work—calling on the spirit of the hummingbird. That would take me at least a minute, and hopefully she wouldn't be on me by then. Given her speed, she might. Still, I figured she would do some preparation of her own, so I hoped this wasn't a mistake. I looked around for a tree big enough to hide in, then selected one a few paces away from it. I flipped a ward in front of yet another tree nearby, and covered it with the grass as best I could.

I reached into my pouch and pulled out the single flask of incendiary ether not put into a ward. I smashed the flask into the smaller tree and began to chant. The Ether caught immediately, set the base of the tree on fire, and provided the extra boost I knew I would need to call the spirit quickly. I managed it, and felt myself get a little faster as the ability to teleport settled over me. I had usually given other people the spirit of the hummingbird, so I hadn't noticed the slight increase in reflexes before. Sweet, just what I needed: Everything was in place! I shouted "spirit clone" and hoped for three, but had to settle for two, so there were now three of me, total, standing there. They knew what they had to do, and so did I. I looked in the direction that seemed clearest and teleported over to it, then activated my phase talisman and just starting running away from the area as fast as I could. By phasing I didn't have to worry about dodging the trees in my way, and made better time. I glanced back, and smoke was rising from the area I had left, making me smile. The game was on!

Stupid Dean, I thought to myself as I appeared in a thick forest. Why does he have to be so darn insightful, anyway? Making me tell him like that, and picking such a romantic spot to do it in, too. The Moon, indeed!

I looked around, and as promised, Dean was nowhere to be seen. Just forest as far as the eye could see. *How are we ever going to find each other in all this?* I thought. *He could be in any direction!*

I looked around, only one way to find out! I hadn't practiced any of those fancy focus skills, like focus attacks or focus style, so I really had nothing to prepare. I had considered it, but honestly, wasn't it more useful to just get better at smacking people around then concentrate on fancy stuff, that only lasted a few seconds anyway? Focus style would have been nice about now, but how many times do you get to strut around and pose before a fight? Never, that's how many times. Apart from "tournaments" like this one, which were few and far between. I was not going to waste training time learning that sort of skill when I knew my actual martial arts skills could still use improvement.

I created three spirit clones, leaving me with very little energy per clone, but I had a plan. The first one to find Dean would engage him and see what he would do. She would deliberately take a fall, giving me that energy back, and then I could counter his plans easily with the next clone. We hopped up into the branches and scattered in four directions, each wondering what Dean had up his sleeve to try and fight me.

As soon as my original was out of sight, I pulled my sunlight dagger out of my pouch and moved into position behind the tree I had selected. This way she couldn't come from behind me, only from in front, and the tree burning off to my left almost guaranteed she would come from the center or the right. The other clone activated his phase talisman and stepped into the nearby larger tree, ready to pounce when the situation called for it. We didn't have long to wait, a Yasui bounded into view.

I stopped a little ways away from Dean, looking for his clones. I didn't spot any, but that didn't mean they weren't there, or that this one wasn't a clone himself. He was holding that glowing knife of his made of sunlight and had his back to a tree. Did he really think he was going to score with that thing? Something must be up...

"Kind of obvious, don't you think?" I shouted, gesturing to the fire.

"I was toasting some marshmallows while I waited for you!" he yelled back. "What kept ya?"

The Yasui I saw seemed to hesitate, probably unsure of what action to take, but she looked around. She didn't see the other clone, now hiding

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opposite her behind the tree, using spirit manipulation to hide his power. She seemed to make up her mind, and predictably sprinted full speed towards me, intent on getting to me before I had a chance to do anything. The nice thing about spirit clones was that normally, this strategy was the correct thing to do. Even with my enhanced reflexes, her speed astonished me, and she sprinted towards me like the wind. Straight towards me, in fact, exactly as I planned given the layout of the trees in this area. I activated the contain ward as she passed over it, which allowed the quintessential unguent inside to burst out, coating her boots. It had been placed into a balloon, as much as the balloon would hold. I had specified, upon creating the ward, that whatever it contained should be released just a centimeter away, straight down. This caused it to rupture apart as it tried to occupy the same space as the ground, spilling the stuff all over the place.

Her speed now worked against her as she slipped and went careening through the grass on her back, allowing my clone the chance to spring from hiding and slap her with the ward he was holding. He activated it, putting in a bunch of energy, and that Yasui disappeared into the ward with a squeak.

I stood atop a branch looking at the smoke rising from behind me and wondered what was going on. *I'm sure a clone went in that direction, but so far it hasn't been damaged, as the knowledge it would have gained hasn't come back to me*, I thought. *I suppose it could have taken out a clone itself, and is now looking for Dean*. But I had to admit I had a bad feeling.

With one clone gone, I needed to move, as the grass was all messed up here, so the same trap wouldn't work twice. *However*, I thought, *perhaps a different trap will*. I pulled two conjure wards out of my pouch and tucked them, in different directions, into the bark below a nearby branch overhead. I had to use grasshopper's leap to reach it, which was easy enough, it wasn't that high. My clone pulled out another contain ward, ready to use it, and we both activated our phase talismans to go hide again.

I came to back up my clone sister by the smoke I had seen, and found only the signs of a brief... something. There was a skid mark on the grass and a tree that was on fire, but no one seemed to be around. I was still and listened, but apart from the fire, there were no sounds here. I wished I had brought my talisman, but it was a little unwieldy to be carrying around in a fight situation, so I had left it in my room. I knew my clone sister was still around, but where? And what was this oily stuff on the ground? I bent

down to take a closer look when a huge net suddenly descended on top of me! I tried to dodge out of the way, but it was on top of me before I could really do anything. I realized, belatedly, that there was no actual sun here, and thus, no shadow to give away something falling on top of me. Dean stepped out from behind a tree, carrying a piece of paper, which he pointed at me. I was getting more tangled up in the net as I tried to free myself, and I felt a curious sensation. I tried to resist it, but everything went dark.

My clone brother and I looked at each other, and nodded. The twenty pounds of net that had fallen on Yasui had done the job well, and the conjure ward had earned its place in my repertoire. I knew that since he had used actuation, rather than risk attaching the ward directly to the struggling form of Yasui and getting caught in the net myself, it would only hold her for a few minutes. However, we had a way around that. He pulled out another contain ward and put the contain ward into a contain ward. He had to use energy on that one, contain wards didn't like doing what he was doing, so he had to force it. Now when it ended she would still be contained, so all was well. The only question left now was, how many more clones did she have, and how to trap them as well? Given what I knew about her energy level, any more than four, quartering her energy for each clone, would leave her with very little per clone. I guessed there might be one more and Yasui herself. I decided to be more direct with the next one in case it really was Yasui and not a clone, and took the hollowed out rock out of my pouch. My clone did the same, and we gathered the net up and pushed it to one side, keeping an eye out for movement.

I was getting worried, perched up in my tree as I was. What was happening over there? It had been several minutes now and nothing- at least one of my clones should have reached the fire by now, which seemed to be dying out. I decided to take a more cautious approach, and tried to decide if I should use air step or just try to leap from tree to tree. Air step would be quieter, but insanely slow, as I would have to concentrate entirely on not falling. It was easy to just stand someplace on air, I could do that all day. Actually moving any distance at all was almost impossibly difficult. On the other hand I could easily leap from tree to tree, getting there much faster but being very noisy. I decided to compromise, get closer to the fire fast, then use air step once I got near.

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I was getting worried, walking silently toward the fire as I was. I didn't hear any sounds of battle, but something had been going on here. The tree that was on fire a few minutes ago was smoldering, and there seemed to be a huge net laying off to one side. I was hiding, trying to figure out my next move. A pebble hit me in the head, and I looked up- there was another one of me standing in the air.

Good, I thought, I have some backup, and no matter what happens to me, she can see it and figure out what's going on here. I stepped into view and approached the site of the scuffle. Two figures flowed out from behind trees and threw something at me. It looked like a rock, was he trying to knock me out or something? I snorted and decided to show off, I was going to do a shattering strike against these little pieces of stone, and smash them to bits! Then get these two Deans good!

Another Yasui stepped from the trees into our "killing" ground, and started to look around. We were both hiding in separate trees, and it didn't seem like she had spotted us. We both knew what we had to do- we stepped out of the tree opposite the Yasui and whipped around the tree, mirroring each other and throwing the hollowed out rock. Into the rock we had placed a contain ward, which was currently holding the other bottle of incendiary ether. We had guessed, based on watching her fight, that she wouldn't try to dodge these pathetic missiles, but would rather smash them, showing off. As I had never used wards in combat before, she was underestimating me very seriously.

I wasn't used to defending from two directions like this, so to my shame I actually missed the rock I went for with my hand. It harmlessly bounced off me, making me wonder what the point was. The rock I aimed a kick at, however, connected and satisfyingly smashed into a million pieces. This, I'm sad to say, was a mistake. A liquid burst from the rock and splashed all over me, setting parts of me on fire and causing the spirit clone technique to end, sending my energy and experience back to the Yasui I had seen standing above.

My clone brother and I were quite satisfied with this outcome. There were probably no more clones to battle, the next Yasui we saw would be the real one. We stepped together to plan our next move when suddenly a Yasui shaped form screamed out of the sky, aiming both legs at our heads.

As energy and knowledge flowed into me I realized I had fallen into the same trap the clone that I had netted fell into. Namely, there were no shadows here to let you know someone was above you. I wasn't sure if she had penetrated my armor with her attack or not, but in this case, I noticed a weakness in my thinking that made sure it didn't matter. When I activated my armor talisman it acted like a magical force shield, and was "intelligent" enough to tell the difference between say a sword striking me and the air I enjoyed breathing on an almost constant basis. The armor didn't keep everything away, just harmful things.

In this case, she fell on my clones with considerable force, driving them to the ground, and that was the kicker, if you'll forgive the pun. My armor didn't consider the ground to be a weapon! I could fall out a plane with my armor active and it wouldn't help one bit on impact. It was the same here- head + ground = no more clone. If I had been invulnerable it might have saved me, perhaps making a talisman that gave me that quality wasn't such a bad idea after all? That she managed to get both of them at once only strengthened my belief I wouldn't win in a close encounter with her. Still, that's what this had turned into, as with the dissolution of my spirit clone brothers, no doubt Yasui knew what had happened to her clones as well, and would now be on guard against it. I held out my hand to my beaver spirit projection (did you think I had just run away all this time? He had an acceleration ward on too.) and he nodded and took it. I wasn't sure if I had to touch him to bring him along, as I never had occasion to test it. Still, we did it, and I gripped my dagger and teleported.

Well that was satisfying, I thought to myself, whirling around in case there were more spirit clones around here. Nothing. *Figures he wouldn't have his real self here*. I realized my energy levels were up, and while still keeping an eye out, thought about what my clones had seen. They had been nearly helpless against Dean, who had done something to them, but I couldn't figure out what. *Had he somehow put them into his pouch?* The energy came back to me when I hit his two clones, so that must be it. *Did he somehow figure out a technique to shut down clones without hurting them, thus sending them back?* He had his own clones to practice on, after all. I needed to know, but was pretty sure I wasn't going to get a chance. I guess I would just have to be very, very careful around the next Dean I saw. There was a loud POP behind me, and a Dean/beaver combo appeared.

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“So it comes down to the two originals... I was really hoping to avoid this,” I said, circling left. My beaver took a step in front of me and circled with me.

“Scared?”

“Yes.” I put on a fake accent and lowered my voice. “It’s a cruel world when friend turns against friend. You know what I’m saying?”

“You don’t have to die,” Yasui said, smiling and getting into the spirit of it. She started circling right. “A small token of your loyalty, a finger, perhaps, and you could be in my good graces again.”

“You could never trust me again, not after what I did. Even if I was acting in your own best interests.”

“You’re right, I was just testing you. It’s too late for us, but tell me one thing: what did you do to my clones?”

“Scared?” I echoed back at her.

“Just curious.”

“I made them disappear. Don’t think this magician is going to reveal his secrets, even at the end.”

“Is this the end for you, then? Where’s that old confidence gone?”

“You know as well as I do, nobody beats Iron Boots Yasui in a one-on-one.”

She shrugged. “I see you’re blurrier than usual. Either you got the shakes real bad or you’ve improved your wards. Think it’ll help?”

“You know me, I’m a lover not a fighter. I figure if I can avoid you long enough, Jimmy the Beaver here will take you out with a lucky shot.”

“What if I took...” she giggled a little, “Jimmy here out first?”

“Then you’d get a knife full of sunshine in the back, sister.”

Yasui shook her head. “I know your weakness, uh, Magic Man. You can’t go more than a few feet from Jimmy, and that means I can hit you both at once. Which I guess I’ll do, seeing as we have nothing left to talk about.”

“I guess not. It was a pleasure knowing you, Boss. I just wish you didn’t take your health so serious like. I brought you ice cream instead of frozen yogurt, did you have to take it so personal?”

We both burst out laughing, “Is that what this is about?” she asked.

“I don’t know, I had to think of something!”

“You’re impossible, you know that? Really, what did you do to my clones?”

“I’ll tell you, if you beat me!”

“Okay, here I come!”

She sprang forward, but with my improved reflexes and the ward speeding me up I had anticipated her. I concentrated on focus defenses, and moved a little ways away from my beaver. It was true what she had said, us being so close meant she could probably strike us both, and he couldn't dodge as well when he was at his limit. I figured I would try to strike a balance between how far away we were. I felt the focus defenses take hold, so for the next four seconds I could react defensively a little faster. Coupled with my reflexes and ward, I hoped that would be enough of an edge to at least survive her first attack. I guess she decided she would try to hit us both like she said, as she lashed out with her right leg towards me. I barely managed to dodge even with my enhancements, and her boot scraped along my armor, deflecting it. Jimmy fired an energy blast at her just as she planted her right foot and kicked high with her left, hitting my beaver square in the face. With my enhancements I clearly saw the energy blast hit her in the side, but as it dissipated I saw she was totally unharmed!

What the? I didn't have time to think about it, as almost in slow motion Yasui's boot connected with my beaver's head, and I felt my own snap back, and almost passed out from the pain. I staggered and my projection vanished, having taken too much damage to be sustained anymore, and Yasui readied her next strike against me. My head felt like it had taken a baseball bat, it wasn't fair this tiny slip of a girl was so strong! I knew only one thing would save me, and shouted “phase,” making me, for the moment, immune to her attack. She looked curiously at me, and kicked at my midsection, but predictably it went right through.

“Now that's just cheating,” pouted Yasui. I was holding my head, and looked at her with one eye cracked open.

“I take half the damage my spirit projection does you know,” I chided her. “That hurt!”

“That's the point,” she said, walking around me. “Anyway, you've lost, so you might as well concede the fight right now.”

“Have I?” I asked through clenched teeth. “Remember, I have a regeneration talisman too, so I'll be fine again in less than a minute, then we can resume.”

“You just can't admit I beat you.”

“I admit you've got me on the ropes, but I could still get in a lucky hit. And remember, it was me who dodged your first attack, so we've proven I can do it.”

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“Yes, your beaver was sort of a liability there, wasn’t he?”

“He was never meant for close combat, just like me. I see Christina was right after all, give me a bow any day. As a point of interest, how did you survive his energy blast?”

“Oh, I’ll be happy to tell you... if you beat me.”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess I deserved that.”

“Yes, you did. So are we just going to stand here while you heal?”

“That’s the idea. I’m feeling a bit better already, thank you. Quite honestly I could teleport away, set up some more traps, you know, the usual. You can thank me for staying and keeping you company later.”

She just snorted and kept circling me, taking a halfhearted jab at me now and then, until I was finally healed again. I stretched.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said, activating focus defenses again, then dropping my phase. “You can start at any time.”

“Thank you I think I-” Yasui said, kicking me twice in mid-sentence.

Both attacks glanced off my armor, though I instinctively tried to dodge. She recovered, and I had a split second to act, and chose energy attack rather than my dagger, as I knew I had a better chance of hitting with that. I wanted to see if she would dodge or just take it like she did before. I had energy to spare, after all. The blast went off but honestly I had no control over it, so she easily dodged it. Even seemingly moving in slow motion compared to me, she was fast!

Perhaps a further distraction? I thought. *There are some skills I know I haven’t had much occasion to use.*

I saw she was still a little off balance from the dodge, so chose something straightforward and invisible, setting her shirt on fire with combust. Unfortunately, it failed, as I was no more accurate with that power than with energy attack. Even if she couldn’t see it coming, she was moving, so I misjudged the attempt and it failed. She came at me again with her trademark double kick move, and again I dodged out of the way.

“Stupid wards!” she shouted. “Stand still, will you?”

With her right in my face like this I figured I’d try combust again, figuring not even I could miss at this range. I was correct, and was satisfied when her shirt burst into flames. She gave a surprised gasp, more from shock than pain, as the shirt literally burned away before my eyes. I was hoping it would have caught fire, forcing her to deal with it, but now it was just gone, which I wasn’t exactly complaining about.

Guess I put a little too much energy into that, I thought.

“You- You- aarg!” said Yasui angrily, throwing her arms over her chest. “I’ll get you for that.”

She double kicked me again, and once again I dodged it. “Keep trying!”

I leveled my fist again, and an energy bolt sprang out, somehow missing her totally, even at this range. *I really have to make a talisman to improve my aim with this*, I thought. *Or make a better weapon for myself that doesn’t rely on my skill to aim*. Yasui didn’t even bother dodging that one, but came in low, trying to trip me up. I felt my focus defense technique go down, and sent another blast towards Yasui. She again struck the armor, but I knew it could take a real pounding, so I wasn’t too worried about it yet. My bolt struck her leg, of all places, so I singed her boot but saw it wasn’t deep enough to do any actual damage to her.

Figures my first bolt to hit would do nothing, sigh.

Yasui double kicked me again; This was getting old, it seemed neither of us had a clear advantage here, the first one to slip up would be the loser in this contest. I saw her raise a leg but she didn’t strike, what the heck was she doing?

I turned on focus defenses again, as she was not striking as I expected, and felt it take hold as she released her kick.

I tried to dodge, but she had anticipated me, and slammed a boot into my head, past my armor and knocking me out.

My eyes flipped open and there we were in the practice room. Yasui started doing a victory dance, and I bent over to retrieve my dragon artifact.

“I won, I won, ha-ha-ha-ha-haa-haaaa. I won! You have to tell me what you did to my clones! Because. I. Won!”

She kept dancing around. *Yup, she’s back to her old self again*, I thought. *This was just what she needed.*

Palmistry

Your life line is very strong, but what's this?

We thanked the ESPer who had created the battleground and went to find a place to sit and talk. I owed her an explanation, after all. Yasui was bouncing along, humming to herself, and I was glad she was feeling better. As expected, our battle had taken no time at all, so only a minute had passed and we went back to my room. Osman was out, so Yasui took her boots off and sat down, cross legged, on my bed.

“So spill it, Magic Man,” she said happily. “What the heck did you do to my clones?”

“I’ll show you.” I got out a contain ward, and sucked a large textbook into it. I handed it to her. “Believe it or not, the book is now ‘inside’ that ward somehow. Possibly some sort of pocket dimension like my pouch, only anyone can get the book out.”

“So you did make them disappear, like you said?”

I nodded. “That’s right. Rip it in half.”

She did, and the book appeared again. “Okay, where did the net come from? Did you buy a huge net in Porta and stick it in one?”

“No, that was a different ward. You really want me to reveal all my secrets, huh?” I asked good-naturedly.

“I could tell your roommate how perverted you are, burning my shirt off like that! Don’t think you’re off the hook about that one, either.”

“That was actually an accident,” I protested. “I just wanted it on fire, so you would focus on it for a second rather than me. Didn’t work out so well... in that sense anyway.”

“So the net?”

I gave a hearty sigh. “The net came from a ward called conjure. It basically makes a single object that sticks around a few minutes. There

were two of them up there, I wanted the net to be pretty big because I know how fast you are.”

“Speaking of that, how did you dodge my attacks so well? Your acceleration wards aren’t that good, unless you’ve been practicing?”

“I have been, but it was a lot of different things working together.” I got my potion out of the bag, “both this potion I made and the spirit of the hummingbird increased my reflexes. You looked to be going in slow motion thanks to all of that. And the best part is, because it was all in our heads, I still have all the stuff I made and can use it later!”

“I have to say, you surprised me with all those traps and things. Then avoiding me for so long; not even my instructors can dodge me that much.”

“Don’t forget my armor talisman took some of those blows.”

She nodded.

“So tell me one thing, even though I lost?”

“Maybe.”

“How did you not get hurt from that energy blast my beaver hit you with?”

“Sacrificing my dwindling energy reserves,” she said. “I’m glad that last blow hit you, I put almost all the energy I had left into it, you know.”

That’s a real problem, that everything we do takes so much energy. That fight didn’t go on that long, but Yasui used all her energy up? I’ll have to think about a way around that... “Oh, that’s how you hit me. But that doesn’t answer my question.”

“True martial artists can force spirit energy through their body in a split second, making them nearly invincible while it lasts. Which is just long enough to deflect an attack, actually.”

“Handy.”

“If you’ve got the energy for it.”

We fell silent.

“So, you managed to beat me. Congratulations. I don’t mind if you embellish it a little for Christina.”

“Who said I would tell her about it?”

“You don’t think she’ll ask how it went?”

“Maybe I’ll just keep her wondering.”

We talked for a while longer, then did some homework together. Osman came back from whatever he was doing, and we told him what happened. He congratulated Yasui and soon it was time for her to go back to her own dorm, which she did after putting her boots back on.

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“Let’s fight again some time when you have some new toys,” she said over her shoulder as she left the room.

Sorry Yasui, but I don’t think so, I thought. The toys I have in mind will let me wipe the floor with you.

One thing about mock combat was that it highlighted gaps in thinking before real combat made you dead. I had been relying on my beaver to do the actual attacking because he was much better at aiming energy blasts than I was. I had therefore neglected to make use of his other excellent power: energy barrier. What if I had been doing it backwards all along? Would it be better for him to create the barrier and have me attack, for instance? The problem was that my battle with Yasui had shown just how bad I was at aiming energy attacks, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. I would just not get better at it with practice without becoming a true spirit energist. My increased reflexes and acceleration ward had let me hold my own for a few seconds, but not being able to get an actual attack in was what really lost me the fight. Also they took me a lot of prep work, drinking potions and calling spirits, and in a real situation I might not have that kind of time. I had a solution to that problem, of course. I wasn’t an artificer for nothing.

My biggest concern was letting attackers get so close that they could take my beaver out in one shot like Yasui did. It not only took an ally out of the fight, it hurt me as well! A spirit clone would have just vanished after being hit like that, but not my spirit projection. I had to keep combatants away from me and strike at range, those were the key. So I went back and forth, was it better to maintain a barrier myself with a talisman that made it stronger, or have him do it while letting me attack with a talisman that made my aim better?

So I replayed the battle in my mind- My beaver generates a barrier and maintains it by my side. Now Yasui has to batter it down before she can even reach me. My beaver gets whatever energy I have when I call him out, a spirit clone gets half or less. The trade off is I get hurt if he does- which way was the better way? In the end it was a little bit of laziness that made my decision for me. Hadn’t I already made a very accurate weapon for Osman just a few months ago? That would cut down on the time I needed to work on it, the design work had already been done.

As far as my increased reflexes went, I had a very devious plan to turn my acceleration wards into an acceleration tattoo. Finally after a year and a half I would make two tattoos, one wind attack and one that made everyone

look like they were moving in slow motion. I decided to put the speed one on the bottom of my foot, not that where I put it mattered. It was making me faster, after all, so it was symbolic, at least. Also how often did you cut the bottom of your foot? So it should be safe there, I would just have to make sure I didn't walk around barefoot on the beach. Or really anywhere else, for that matter. I would keep the wind attack one where Osman had put his, on the right palm, so I could warn people off like he could. It felt good to be working on talismans for myself again, I hadn't made one since my energy dragon, and that was like forever ago!

When they were finished I went out to the forest where Osman had tested his and fought a couple of my spirit clones to get the hang of moving around while accelerated. It seemed pretty hard on my body, being forced to move that fast, but I figured I would be fine with that regeneration talisman on my left leg taking care of any cellular damage. As I was much better at making talismans than wards, the boost it provided me was quite astonishing. Anyone that next fought me would be in for a very big surprise. I was feeling pretty good after that. I had analyzed what I had done wrong in my fight and come up with plans to not make those mistakes again. That's what being Iron Man- I mean what school was all about, right?

It was a couple of weeks later, when we were decorating our hallway for Christmas, that Osman asked me something odd. I wasn't even sure I had heard him right, the question didn't seem to register as something he should even be curious about, so I had to ask him to repeat himself.

"Why haven't you asked Yasui out yet?"

"Why haven't- don't tell me you're going to if I don't?"

"Oh, no-no-no," he said, waving his hands. "It's just Kat's been bugging me to ask for like a week now, and she's just pestering me about it so I finally gave in and said I would ask."

"I see," I said, wondering if that was the real story. "Then why didn't she just ask me herself?" *Though he does usually tell the truth about things...*

"She's embarrassed about it I guess."

"So she makes you ask? Kat, if you want to know, come out and ask me yourself, okay?"

Suddenly Yasui was standing in front of me, holding a big red heart. "Why haven't you asked me out Dean, I thought you liked me?"

"Cut it out, that's not funny."

THE UNVEILED WORLD

She shimmered and became the regular Kat I had seen when she first used illusion to talk to us. “Sorry, it’s just like he said, I want to know but it’s really none of my business, so...”

“You’re right, it’s not.”

“But you do like her, don’t you?”

“Sure. Look, do you really want to know?”

“Yeah.”

“Because I can see the future.”

“You mean like a seer? I thought you weren’t going to, it wouldn’t do you much good.”

“No, not with powers, just thinking about things.” I sighed. “She’s a front line fighter, right? I mean if she chooses to use her abilities like she’s supposed to and fight demons on Earth, rather than just turning her back on them like she seems to always be a week away from doing. So let’s say she gets it together in the next two years and becomes a really great fighter. What’s going to happen? She’s going to go where the fights are, meaning she’ll always be on the move, always in danger. Always either too keyed up or exhausted from fighting to do normal couple things. Now, where will I be during that time?” I started pacing back and forth, and Osman and Katrina watched me. “Right now I’m a talisman maker first and foremost. In the next two years I can see myself picking up alchemy because the two seem to go hand in hand, but I’m not a fighter.” Osman looked at my hand, and I curled my fingers up, hiding it. They didn’t know about the one on my foot. “Yes, yes, I weaponized myself, because like you I know what’s out there. It’s only natural to protect myself and the people around me. But I’m not gleefully rushing into battle like a spirit hunter would. Why send a blacksmith to fight on the front lines if you take my meaning? So I’ll probably be here on the island like my parents, or at the Foundation headquarters making talismans for people who come in and request them. So let’s say we fall in love and now it’s graduation time. Yasui has the choice to stay with me, totally wasting her talents, or leaving to go fight the good fight like she should. Either way we’re both miserable, because we would be apart most of the time.”

“You seem to have this all planned out,” said Osman.

“It’s been my goal ever since I learned I could make stuff to become the best in the world, I’ve said that many times. And I’ve already been offered a job at the Foundation, did you know that?” They shook their heads. “It was right before I gave Asteraceae the tattoo, that pale fellow offered me a job. I aim to be the guy handing out talismans to people before a

tough mission, to help keep them alive so they come back. When they're out there using my stuff, I'm fighting with them, right? If my wards and talismans can save even one life, my existence is worthwhile. And that's what I want to do. Would I like doing it with Yasui? Yeah, she's great, if a little moody sometimes. But I know she can't fulfill her destiny being with me, because we're just too different. I'll be her friend, and always be there for her, but I'm setting her free to live her own life."

Katrina looked a little stunned. "Oh," she said at last. "I thought you might say you were too shy or you were going to in the new year or something but I guess you really had a real reason you thought of and everything."

"So you're going to be alone your whole life?" asked Osman. "Even petitioners get married you know, guardian angels and all. Otherwise there wouldn't be many of us left right about now!" He laughed.

I laughed with him. "You know, I asked my mother how she made the talisman egg keep aging me, and she told me. She also told me, when I was mature enough, how to nullify that to become truly immortal. I figure it's only fair. They went through the trouble of putting my soul in the darn thing, after all. Then I'm going to study everything, and my goal a thousand years in the future is to master all powers. Then I want to go meet some aliens and see what powers I can learn from them. So yes, I probably will be alone, because losing person after person would probably get to me after a while. I should ask some old breath stealers about that, see how they cope."

"Don't be foolish!" cried Katrina. "You can't just shut yourself off from other people!"

"That may have come out a little more severe than I intended. I don't mean I'm just locking myself away like a hermit, never talking to anyone, or making friends. I'm just saying I won't try too hard to make anyone fall in love with me, that's all."

"Couldn't you make the woman you love immortal?"

"I heard a saying once- 'Marriage is betting half your possessions you'll love them forever.' Forever for me is a different proposition than for most. To answer your question, yes, probably, I could. But say every two hundred years a new love comes along. Now I've got five immortal women out there because I can't commit to someone 'forever.' What about having kids? It's all well and good for Cain, but can I in good conscience have a bunch of kids with a bunch of different women? I don't think so."

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“I guess it is a little more complex than I thought with you,” Katrina said sadly. “I just want you to be happy.”

“You’ve seen me be happy, it’s called ‘making a new talisman.’”

“I just hope that’s enough for you.”

“With all of the-”

“Shoot, talk about something else, she’s coming over here!”

We looked over where Katrina was pointing, and sure enough, Yasui and another girl I didn’t know were walking purposefully towards us.

“Hey Yasui, what’s up?” I asked her.

“Something serious, I’m afraid. Kat, can you call Christina here, she’ll want to hear this.”

“Sure thing,” answered Katrina.

There was a pause.

“You in there, Katrina?” asked Yasui, looking at Osman.

“Oh, sorry, I was already using illusion to talk to Dean and Osman and forgot to bring you in. I sent the message telling her where we are.”

She introduced Micha and said she was a seer, and they both looked a little spooked. I asked if anything was wrong, and she said she would explain when Christina got there. We didn’t wait long, as Christina jogged down the hallway towards us.

“Good, we’ll all need to be tested, I’ll explain what happened now that we’re all here.”

“Yeah, what’s this all about?” asked Christina.

“Our floor was having a little get together and Micha here was reading everybody’s fortune for fun. You know, will I net a handsome guy, will I be rich, that sort of thing. So I asked her to see if... well, that doesn’t matter. What does matter is that she couldn’t do it, she said I have no future!”

“You’re going to die?” I gasped, concerned.

“No, oddly enough. She said if I was going to die then that would be my fate. When she tried to look into my future it was just a big blank. That’s when I remembered some odd things about us.”

“What *isn’t* odd about us?” Osman muttered.

“Remember how, during our first field trip, the seers said they hadn’t foreseen any danger to students, but Christina caused a cave in anyway?”

“You would have to bring that up again.”

“It’s important! Then later, before we fought that unholy chosen, remember how Mr DeLefeu said something weird, like the seers didn’t get a negative answer or something when they asked if Dean would be okay in the end?”

“Yeah, that was weird, I still don’t know what he meant.”

“Don’t you see, it’s part of a larger pattern! Micha, try to read my friends’ future, okay? I’m guessing you won’t be able to.”

“Okay,” Micha said, “who wants to go first?”

“This is stupid,” said Christina. “Can I go now?”

“You just volunteered,” Yasui said, shoving Christina in front of Micha.

“Fine, let’s get this over with.”

In turn, Micha took our hands and concentrated, and only with Osman did she get an answer about him one day understanding Heaven’s will. He seemed pleased with that, but Micha just looked flustered.

“So why doesn’t it work on you three?” she asked. “My power isn’t broken, I read Osman just fine.”

“I wish I knew,” answered Yasui, “But you all understand, right? Our future is messed up or something. Remember how Haniel said we shouldn’t even be here when he first met us? And that naga knew Christina even though Christina didn’t know him? We never figured out why that was, and now this? What’s going on with us?”

She looked really scared, and was obviously looking at me for answers, but I didn’t have them.

I shook my head. “I don’t know too many seer powers, they’re too much like ESPers. No offense Katrina too many of your powers depend on knowing other powers, like the ESP skill leading into projection. So I couldn’t even learn half the- Hey, there’s a question! Katrina, have you ever tried to read Osman’s future?”

“Who are you-” Micha started to say.

“Actually, yes,” said Katrina, appearing before us.

“YAAAAA!” yelled Micha. “Where did you come from? Were you invisible? Maybe my powers *are* failing me.”

“Don’t worry about it, she’s a special case. So it worked then?”

Katrina nodded.

“Okay, you try to read me then!” said Yasui, grabbing Osman’s hand.

“Uh, you have to touch her...” said Micha, pointing to Katrina.

“Who?” said Yasui, trying to hide a grin as Katrina disappeared again.

“This girl- Now where did she go?”

“It’s harder to use two powers at once, give her a second, she’ll be back,” I explained.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“You two are loving this, aren’t you?” Christina asked Yasui and me.

“I am ashamed to admit it’s amusing me a little,” I answered.

Katrina appeared again. “Nothing, just like she said. I don’t know what to make of it. Who doesn’t have a future?”

Relating the Past

Those that do not learn history...

We spoke to several of the seer teachers but got no good answers, all of them agreed our being “immune” to premonition type skills was very odd. They assured us we weren’t dead or anything like that, as even a dead body has a future, so it wasn’t that. So we added that into the growing mental list of mysteries that surrounded us and kept looking into things. For once the solution didn’t involve talismans, so I was at a loss as to what to do. Yasui threatened to become depressed again, so Osman and I tried to keep her spirits up as best we could. Christina said she couldn’t be bothered, let her be depressed if she wants, so that was a big help.

Before we went home for Christmas break I started practicing ritual dance and learned to make an ignore ward. The unique property of this ward let anyone under its influence become “invisible.” It wasn’t true invisibility, you could still see yourself and everything, but other’s vision just slid past you like you weren’t even there. I thought it might come in handy, especially paired with my phase talisman, if I ever needed to infiltrate somewhere.

The nicest thing about ritual dance was it being wholly un-supernatural, meaning anyone could learn to become great at it, even me. Needing to light a fire just to have a better chance at calling a spirit was very inconvenient, most places. I always “carried” some clones with me, so I could always have a couple of people assist me with a dance. Yasui caught me practicing one day and said it looked fun, so I started teaching her what I had learned. We were dancing around when Osman walked in and froze. He thought we had gone nuts because we were laughing and prancing around, acting like animals. We assured him it was schoolwork, but he didn’t seem convinced.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

It was early January when Osman was doing his daily check in with Haniel, that he got an excited response for once and jumped up to petition him right away.

“He seems really anxious, I hope it’s not bad news,” Osman said on the way to go get Yasui and Christina.

“I’m sure it’s good news for a change,” I said, hopeful.

Osman looked doubtful.

“I have good news!” said Haniel when he appeared, holding a large sack. “It’s a little late for Christmas, but wait until you see what’s in the bag.”

“Told you,” I said, as Haniel dumped the bag out on the floor. A variety of objects tumbled out, objects that looked like they needed a good cleaning.

“Ugh, did you have to do that in here?” said Christina, wrinkling her nose. “We didn’t need any more dust.”

“Oh, sorry about that,” said Haniel, coughing a little himself. “Guess I got a little too excited. All this stuff was taken from various places we think Charna stayed at, and some of them are supernatural.” He picked up one that was shaped like a cylinder and handed it to me.

“This one in particular interested us, take a look.”

One end curved inward, and had grooves leading into the center under a piece of what looked like glass. The other end was flat, but had a tiny needle like projection from the center. I turned it this way and that, examining it.

“You don’t think...”

Haniel nodded, smiling.

“Well, what, don’t keep us non-artificers in suspense!” said Yasui.

“I think this item was used to put the holes in the barrier that dreamer power is leaking out through.”

“That little thing?” said Christina. “We’re talking about something the All-Father made Himself, right?”

“If reports are to be believed,” I muttered. “It makes some sense,” I offered more loudly, showing it to her. “You fire energy in this end and it’s focused to a needle point on this end.” I turned it over. “We know Charna had no shortage of power to throw around, but even she knew it would be hard to crack that barrier. So she decided to put holes in it, instead. If I can figure out if this really is what made those holes, maybe I can make something that’ll pinch them shut again!”

“What about the rest of this stuff?” asked Osman, picking up a small book and leafing through it. I glanced over at it, and it looked like it was full of random scribbles.

“Hang onto it for the moment,” answered Haniel. “We can look into it later. Right now we need to focus on closing those holes so dreamer power, whatever it is,” he looked over at me, “stops cracking your world up.”

We all nodded.

“My other piece of good news,” continued Haniel, “is that I got permission for you to go visit the barrier if you need to. You’ll probably have to at least see it, and we might want to test that item out, though I hate to make any more holes. One more probably won’t hurt anything at this point.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll have a look at this, though I’m out of practice figuring out other people’s stuff. I haven’t needed to do it since I studied Tyrfake. Then we can go see the barrier ourselves, and I’ll work on something to fix the holes!”

“Shouldn’t you leave that in the hands of, I don’t know, a professional?” asked Christina.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you’re a second year student. I admit I’ve seen you obsessively read through the entire talisman section of our school library, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Actually, I surpassed all the artificer teachers at this school months ago, and have been improving my skills on my own ever since. My original ability focused studies teacher said I surpassed him rather quickly, and he had no more to teach me. So yes, if there’s anyone that can make a talisman to undo what Charna did, you’re looking at him.”

“You’re really that good?” asked Yasui. “I thought maybe that thing with Asteraceae was just you, uh, bragging.”

I nodded. “I just seem to have the knack for it, I don’t know why. Sure, it’s partially because while most first year students were learning stupid wards, I was duplicating Tyrfake. My teacher expressed amazement I picked up talisman making as quickly as I did. Mr Delefeu thought it would take me a year to duplicate the sword, I did it in a month. He said true martial artists like Yasui can increase their combat skills without limit, but he hadn’t heard of too many people who could do the same with talismans. So I just got lucky I guess.”

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“Is that true?” Christina asked her.

“It’s what I’ve been told,” she answered. “My sensei has been pleased with my progress in Muay Thai, and said I was nearing the limit of human skill and to keep practicing to break that limit.”

“That’s great, Yasui,” I said, excited. “No wonder I had such a hard time avoiding your attacks in our fight.”

“Really? You seemed to dodge a lot of them.”

I laughed. “I was using spirit energy like crazy. I couldn’t have gone much longer myself, if you want the truth.”

“My friend Dean the human battery!” she said, laughing herself.

“Anyway, thanks for bringing us this stuff, we’ll get right on it,” I said to Haniel.

“Heaven’s been looking for months, and it seems I’ve been elected to solve the problem, as I took an interest in it. I don’t mind, actually. It’s a nice break from staring at the tree all the time.”

We headed back to our rooms, Haniel trailing behind because he was interested in looking around at the school some more. I had the objects Haniel brought us safely tucked away in my pouch, and was feeling a little better about the future no seer could tell me about. Finally I might be able to do something really big, and really good!

I spent a week in class going over the function of the odd cylinder Haniel had brought me, my teacher happy to have a real-life puzzle to let the class investigate. As far as we could determine, Haniel was right. A blast of energy, precisely placed, was channeled by the device into the center and released in a needle like burst. I also quickly made a talisman for helping to call out my beaver spirit projection. It was energy based, and I only needed a slight boost to make sure I always succeeded, as it wasn’t too hard to just call him out. With my luck though I’d really need him and be unable to get him, so I figured I might as well take care of that little situation before it became an issue. I clipped it on the chain with my phase talisman, I wouldn’t need both of them at the same time, after all.

We scheduled with Haniel to go see the barrier, and he said he would send an ophan, or “wheeled angel” to come get us the next day. Osman said he had recently learned to petition them himself, they were very useful because they could basically take you anywhere by turning into a portal. Of course they were nearly impossible to petition, so I wondered what the point was. If you had a few hours and someplace really important to go that

you couldn't reach by any other means, you could at least try. They looked kind of freaky, but they were agreeable, and he said it would be nice to be able to use one without doing all the work of calling it himself. It's important to note that during this time, Katrina focused on her premonition abilities, trying to solve the mystery of why the three of us didn't register to that power. I mention it because it was that night she first had what the other seers and ESPers were calling the "FuturePast dream."

"Osman! Osman! Calm down!" I shouted at him, as he awoke screaming that night.

"Dean?" he asked, blinking. "What happened?"

"You were shouting in your sleep," I explained. "What were you dreaming about?"

"I don't know."

"Actually, I was the one dreaming at the time," Katrina said, popping up in front of us.

"How does that even work? No, don't tell me. It must have been bad, whatever it was."

"It was the same dream others have been talking about for months, the one they said was left over from what Charna did on the Moon. But I'm sure I only had that dream because I've been practicing premonition, so it must happen in the future. I just don't know how."

"How can that be?" I asked. "You can't dream about something happening in the future when the event you're dreaming about has already happened in the past."

"That's what everyone is saying, but the dream keeps happening."

"What was it about?"

She shook her head. "No, we need to get Albert here first. I want to know how his experience differs from the dream."

"Can it wait until morning? I hate to disturb him this late at night."

"I'd rather talk about it while the dream is fresh in my mind."

I sighed. "Okay, I'll go get him, wait here."

I went over to his dorm room and let myself in with my phase talisman, not wanting to wake his roommate too. He said he would come and we both went back to my room, where Osman was pacing around.

"Good, you're here," said Katrina. "Albert, I need you to tell me exactly what happened on the Moon."

"At three in the morning?" he said sleepily.

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“Please, it’s important.”

“I guess it must be. Okay, Moon, right. Well, we prepared for a while, and there were a lot of us to start. A bunch of wizards, some guys with weird amulets, I forget what group they belonged to. Then it was our group, you know, Asteraceae, Carlita, Haniel, a couple of other spirit hunters. Juno came along though Carlita advised against it. A demon Carlita had dealings with, a couple of others you don’t know. We got up there and were immediately attacked by these weird looking things that started sucking the magic out of the wizards. We took off running away from them and left the magic users to fend off the creatures, as they weren’t interested in us. Then the amulet people got turned to stone somehow. We continued on our way, and there she was. She was standing next to this huge cylinder thing, the talisman cannon. She was performing some ritual or something to fire demonic energy at Heaven, holy energy at the Demon World and Earthly energy at Earth. This would have destroyed them all in the most phenomenal blast of energy the universe had ever seen gathered in one place. There were five or six vessels there, which the spirit hunters took care of pretty quickly. We got her out of the ritual area and Carlita basically just smashed into her with her spirit weapon, almost finishing her off right there. Charna started babbling about her mission to punish the All-Father and started drawing in a bunch of that energy she had gathered. It was freaky. All that power started changing her, and she healed up and came back stronger than ever. She turned into this weird creature thing, and came after us. There was a brief scuffle, but obviously we won, what with the Earth still being there and everything. It was an amazing fight, but not as hard as I thought it was going to be, given who she was. Honestly I expected her to put up more of a struggle, but in the end, I was the only one that got seriously hurt. The others all recovered, and we went home. Does that help?”

“The dream is very different,” said Katrina, looking worried. “It’s basically the opposite of what you described. You all appear on the Moon, and yes, in the dream there are a lot of you. Nothing meets or attacks you, it’s just emptiness up there. You walk to the cannon and there she is- looking like a regular person, but carrying an ax as big as a small car. There’s another one of her, holding a sword made of fire, and a third that has this shimmer going around her, and she’s floating. The circle she made is there, and there’s another copy of her inside performing the ritual. I also saw a very beautiful woman with skin that looked like marble, and next to the floating Charna was a large spider, which reminded me of your Beaver,

Dean, now that I think about it. Also, you know how when Dean puts an acceleration ward on someone they start to blur a little bit? Well, all the Char-nas shout something and start blurring. Then the slaughter begins- she moves around everyone like they're standing still, and kills everyone there in seconds. The spanish girl holding the bull looking creature seems to turn into a demon herself, and holds her own better than anyone, but she too falls, and all three are laughing and laughing as the beam fires. That's when it ends."

"I like my version better, we lived through that one. Oddly though your story is more what I expected to happen, so it turning out the way it did always puzzled me. What do you think it means?"

Katrina shook her head. "I don't know, but from what I've heard it's the same for every seer that has that dream. Everyone who goes gets killed, end of story."

"The point is it happened years ago now. She made some threat about coming back in a thousand years, and Carlita was all like "Haniel and I will be waiting for you," because she's cool like that. You say you see us there? All my old friends, like Asteraceae?"

Katrina nodded.

"So it can't be the future. It's done. Over. The End. It's just some weird, could-have-happened dream."

"I think you're wrong," said Katrina carefully. "I think that whatever this information comes from when we use premonition is trying to warn us that it still could happen."

"Come on, it's impossible!"

"Is it? Our very being here seems impossible, remember Haniel meeting Christina, again? We don't know how that happened, but it did. It could happen again, changing the present we know to what happened in the dream. Three people who don't seem to have futures became friends, two of which Haniel and a naga recognized, and Dean here who may have been called Toby before!"

"I-" Albert stopped. "I guess you're right. Is there anything we can actually do?"

"The biggest mystery here," I ventured, "is the difference in power between the woman you fought and the woman you expected to fight, am I right?"

Albert nodded.

"So that's the key. Let's find out why a person who supposedly was a progenitor and had trained for thousands of years got taken out, no offense, by a couple of high school kids."

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“Hey, we were awesome!” protested Albert. “I still am. And Carlita could take anybody, hands down.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I guess we’ve added another mystery to our list, let’s hope they start getting solved soon, I can hardly keep them straight.”

Visitation

Welcome to Paradise

There was a standing order at the school that anyone who had the FuturePast dream should report it, so the next morning Osman and I went down to Mrs LaRoche's office to make our report. She was surprised to see me there, but I explained I was just there for moral support, I didn't know premonition. Yet. Katrina explained the dream she had and Mrs LaRoche said it was pretty standard by now, that seemed to be the one all right. She also explained that, no, something like this had never happened before and yes, there was a forum for people who had the dream to talk about it that we could access from the Demongate Website. Apparently she had fielded many of these requests before, I was thinking.

"Why don't adults ever have any answers to important matters like this when we ask them?" Katrina complained as we made our way to homeroom.

"As we've proven, not even seers can know everything," I replied. "And this school has a history of unexplained things happening to it, right? Personally I would have felt left out if, coming here, I didn't receive the entire experience. Would you want to be one of those boring, normal people that nothing ever happens to?"

"I don't know," said Osman, "that's not sounding too bad at the moment, actually."

"Bah."

"We need to figure out how to keep the dream from happening soon, I personally don't want to have to watch that scene ever again."

THE UNVEILED WORLD

“I’m sorry to say this Kat but I think keeping it from happening again so three entire dimensions don’t get blown up overrides your “I don’t want to watch that scene again” just a little.”

“Well of course I want all of reality to stay around, that goes without saying.”

“Just checking.”

“That aside, how are we going to do anything about it? Do you know of any time traveling powers?”

“Albert said he and his friends got a glimpse a year into the future through Lucifer’s power, but I don’t think that was the same thing.”

“Don’t get any ideas about me petitioning Lucifer!” Osman exclaimed, shocked.

I chuckled. “No, I’m just saying that if his power couldn’t do it for real, I’m not sure there is a power that can.”

“What about dreamers?” asked Katrina. “They’re pulling power from the All-Father right, and what is there *He* can’t do?!”

“I guess I never learned a lot about what they can do. Frankly their power scares me more than a little because it’s so much better than mine. We did learn from Mr DeLefeu that ignoring a power because you find it worrisome just leads to disaster, so I guess I should man up about it.”

“We’d have to talk to Sadye about it. She’s the best dreamer, after all.”

“That’s all well and good, but even going back in time doesn’t solve our problem. We can’t just kill her in the past, that would mess up this future, possibly even more than it already is. We would have to steal her powers somehow, and I doubt she would hold still while I put a tattoo of negation for each power somewhere on her body. Look at what I’ve learned and made in a year and a half here at Demongate. She’s better than me because she can master any skill, while I can only explore the fringes. Add to that she’s thousands of years old, and I don’t doubt she has more powers than you can shake a stick at! How would we neutralize them all?”

“What powers do you think she used in the dream to... well, kill everyone?”

“Well,” I said, thoughtful. “The enormous ax could be a spirit weapon or just a sweet soul she found and kept around through soul extracting. Was that copy of her dressed differently?”

“I didn’t really stop to look at her wardrobe, sorry.”

“Well, next time see if you can tell, it could be important. The fire sword could be a talisman or magic. Obviously the spider is like my beaver, a spirit projection. Now, you said the other lady that was there, she looked like she was made of marble?”

“Yes. Charna threw a ward onto it to make it faster too. It just pummeled anything that came near it into the ground.”

“I’d have to check with Albert, but it sounds like a golem, something she made to be the perfect collaborator. Never talks back, always follows orders, won’t tell anyone what she’s up to, and can fight for her. We would have to steal that away from her, no easy task let me tell you. Of course we’re overlooking the obvious, that she can either use spirit clones or has some other means of copying herself, so there could be a ton of them in an instant if she needed them.”

“And like you said about that spider, couldn’t it have a bunch of powers on its own?”

“Exactly. Fighting her would be bad news, if not outright fatal for just about anyone. So let’s recap, shall we? We just have to go back in time, somehow seal her powers, steal her insanely strong toy that will try to beat the crap out of us as we do all this, then get back to our own time, alive. Oh, and we can’t do it too far away from the actual date they go to fight her, because knowing her she’ll just undo whatever we do to her!”

“You’ll have a plan by this afternoon, right?”

“I’ll put it on my to-do list. Right after learn Portuguese.”

“I guess it is pretty hopeless.”

“Not at all!”

“But the way you said it-”

“Don’t you see? We’ve already done it! We must have, or someone did, and that’s why Albert and the rest prevailed in the past. We just have to figure out how our future selves made it happen so when we become them, we can properly get ourselves into this mess of figuring out what to do by traveling into the greater past to weaken Charna so the future becomes what Albert experienced, and we can walk to class today discussing it. Clear?”

“Say that again?”

“No time, we must get to class now. I’m sure math or life science holds the answer to this current dilemma. I feel it in my very bones. This one here, specifically,” I said, pointing to my little finger of the left hand.

“Now Dean,” said Osman, “if classes were canceled every time a student had to face impossible odds to save the world, would anyone ever go to classes?”

That afternoon Osman made sure everything was set up with Haniel and told him where to send the ophan, who appeared before us like two great wheels of fire. I had invited Albert along, while Yasui just came along

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to satisfy her curiosity. Christina didn't want anything to do with it, but I needed to test the puncture device and I explained only she could channel the needed energy and had the pinpoint control needed to activate it.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat. "As you put it that way..."

Mr DeLefeu also was there with us. Not that he believed this would be dangerous like going to the Demon World, but because he thought he could help come up with something to seal the holes if he saw them for himself.

We stepped through and found ourself standing on nothing before a shimmering, orange barrier that seemed to stretch to infinity in all directions.

"Welcome!" said Haniel, stepping down to meet us. "I hope you all can figure something out, because I'm at a loss."

We all looked sideways to see what he was stepping on, but it seemed like nothing.

"Oh," he said, laughing. "Getting around this place takes a little getting used to. Just imagine stairs or a platform or whatever you want, and think about moving in that way, and you'll move. You'll get the hang of it. Come on, I'll show you one of the holes."

We all walked over to the wall and Haniel concentrated. "Here," he said, pointing. "Try doing a spirit sense right at this spot here."

We all concentrated, and he was right, I could feel something rushing past us and away from that very spot. Everyone nodded.

"There's a hole there, all right," said Mr DeLefeu. "Let's get to work."

Albert, Mr DeLefeu and I pulled some things from our respective bags, thinking we could start simple and work our way up. It seemed laughable, but I stuck a piece of paper on the wall and tried to use some simple tape to hold it on. The instant I let go, it just slid off as though there was nothing there holding it. Mr DeLefeu brought out a ward he said would reflect power back he created just for the occasion, and tried sticking it to the barrier over the hole, but again it just slid off. When he told me about it I wondered if it could be used to bounce energy blasts back at people, and he said sure. As long as you held it in your hand and wanted to risk your life trying to catch one. I said no, that was okay, I would stick to just getting out of the way. Albert tried some of his alchemical adhesive, the viscid mucus, which he very carefully eyedropped into the ward and quickly smashed onto the barrier. Predictably, it slid off. He splashed some alcahest over the paper so he didn't get his hand stuck to it when he picked it up, and asked us if we had any more bright ideas.

“Can’t you get a feel for this stuff with analysis?” I asked.

He shook his head. “That only works on matter, not energy, and this barrier is most definitely energy.”

“So much for trying to patch the holes,” I said. “You would think whoever is behind this barrier would notice their power leaking out and try to fix it.”

“If I was making it,” Yasui said, “I would have made it self healing.”

Haniel looked over at her, then me. “He probably never figured it would be found, much less damaged like this.” Then to me he said, “This barrier is bigger than Earth, I don’t even know how huge it is, the power leaking out is like you losing skin cells every day. You don’t notice that, do you?”

“I guess not. I guess you’re up, Christina.”

I got out the puncture device and asked Katrina to please use telekinesis to stick it up against the barrier. If this really did what we thought, studying it was worthwhile, so we could hopefully figure out a way to counteract what it did.

“Don’t you trust me Dean?” Christina asked with a smile. “I do hit what I aim at, you know.”

“It’s not that, I don’t know what kind of backlash there’ll be when we hit this thing, I’d rather not be right next to it.”

“Coward.” She concentrated, and energy started swirling around her, and she got out her bow.

“Now remember,” I said, “don’t use your full power right away. Let’s work up to it, we don’t want to cause any major damage. Or destroy our only clue,” I added quietly.

“I was there when the plan was discussed, Dean. I also have this thing called a memory?”

“I know, I’m just nervous, okay? Go ahead.”

She sighted with an arrow and let it fly, easily putting it in the exact center of the device and energizing it. We held our breath as the device weakly flashed and the energy dissipated. Katrina pulled the device away and we checked for a hole. No hole. We tried it twice more, each time Christina put more energy into it. Finally she used her ability as a spirit energist to store energy and release it in one big burst, which gave the device the energy it needed to create a new hole. She powered down again.

“Okay, this is our culprit,” I said, taking it back from Katrina. “Any ideas?” I asked Mr DeLefeu.

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“I think we could adapt the talismans that close demon gates, actually. We use the same basic principle as this device, only instead of a needle point on the end we have a ring of needles pointing inward. It would take some exact placement, but if we get it right over the hole we could slam the gap shut by hitting it from all sides simultaneously. That’s what we do for demon gates, pinch closed the space like it was a sheet of rubber with a hole in it. I hope your wheeled friend here doesn’t mind,” he pointed a thumb at the ophan, slowly turning above us. “We’ll probably have to try more than once to get it right, so we’ll be back here a couple of times.”

“I’ve been given leeway in this matter, and solving the problem just by shuttling you back and forth a few times doesn’t seem that bad.”

“Good,” he nodded. “Let’s see if we can get an estimate on how many holes there are, just so we know what we’re dealing with here.”

We spent probably an hour poking around, luckily the holes didn’t seem too spaced out. It seemed like Charna was concentrating her efforts in one spot rather than spreading it out, probably trying to break the shield apart by weakening it in one area. It was either too much of a hassle or took too much energy or she figured enough was leaking out for her to capture, which was good for us. Still, there were at least a hundred holes to close, so we probably wouldn’t be able to fix the problem in one sitting anyway. That brought up a good point; how had she collected the energy that was coming out? If we could find that, maybe we could create a second shield, blocking the power that flowed out and redirecting it. It was worth a try.

“I can practice going into higher spirit grades,” said Christina, when presented with how much energy she would need to expend to totally fix the problem. We figured it would take more energy per hole to close them then open them, based on the plan to duplicate this device with the changes Mr DeLefeu had proposed.

“I’ve stuck to the third level because higher than that is where you start blowing up electric devices and knocking things over, so it’s not all that useful most of the time. Around here though I don’t have to worry, so I could get my energy pretty high. Not to mention I could pull some out of Dean, and his dragon talisman, if he doesn’t mind lending it to me.”

I shook my head. “Not at all, if it’ll get these holes closed faster.”

“It’ll take you some time to make this talisman you’re talking about, right?”

“Yeah, we’re totally working blind here. I need to make a similar but different copy of this, and also incorporate a different function, whatever seals the gates, and make them work together at the same time. Then hope it works so I don’t have to start again. It’s going to be a challenge.”

“Then I have plenty of time to practice.”

“Good thing you’re the greatest talisman maker on Earth then, isn’t it?” asked Yasui with a smile.

“I better be,” I said, looking up at the barrier.

So Albert set about creating an object that looked like the one Charna had made, only with a different exit channel, and I started trying to turn it into a talisman. Albert actually made a couple of them, just in case my early efforts didn’t pan out. I decided to separate the functions, as that’s what the original seemed to do, and it would help if I got the second part wrong. The first part was the glass that was on top, I figured out that when struck by energy it redirected it down the channels of the device, and into the center. There it was changed in some way I just tried to copy, probably turning it into a type of energy that could pierce the barrier. Of course I had to mix in the sealing function, which was the trickiest part of the whole thing, and then send the energy on. The device then shot the energy down through the bottom, hopefully grabbing the edges of the barrier and slamming them together with enough force to seal the hole.

By making the glass separately I was able to remove it, should the bottom part not work. The glass did the same job regardless. It still took me until the beginning of March to do all this, while of course trying to keep my grades up and still do something fun once in a while.

Finally the day arrived and we set out to test the (second) completed device. We called Haniel and he sent the angel to come fetch us, and we again stood in front of the barrier.

“Don’t go all out,” I said to Christina, as Mr DeLefeu, the person with the best spirit sense positioned the item. “By that I mean don’t bother with spirit grades.”

“Why not? I’ll need the extra energy if I’m going to close all these holes today.”

“That’s just it, you’re not. This is just a test to see if we can close the holes. We don’t want them closed just yet.”

“I thought everything was rush-rush on this?”

“It is, but I haven’t had a chance to talk to Sadye yet about her bringing us through time. If a dreamer’s power is the only way to do it, I don’t want to cut off the source of that power just yet.”

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“I guess that makes sense.”

“Okay, it’s positioned!” yelled Mr DeLefeu.

“Kat says she’s got it,” said Osman, “You can let it go.”

The talisman stuck to the barrier, and Christina stepped down a little to get a better shot. Once again she built up energy and fired an arrow directly into the center. It energized, and went quiet. We all started walking over, but Mr DeLefeu shooed us back, concentrating. He took the talisman down and felt around the barrier, carefully taking his time. He turned to us and smiled, “It worked.”

Standing Up

“You got the heart, you got the power.”--Stan Bush

With a working talisman in hand, the only thing we had left to do was make sure the FuturePast dream didn't come true by somehow weakening Charna. Obviously we, or someone, had done it, but how? It was time to talk to Miss Ransbottom, so the principal told her to come to his office after classes, and I met her there.

“Hello Dean, how have you been?” she asked me.

“Fine, thanks. You? Adjusting to being here I hope?”

“Oh, this school is amazing. I wish I could have come here as a girl, rather than figuring everything out on my own. I've been having a blast, you kids are great.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Mr DeLefeu. “The matter we need to talk about today is a little more serious.”

“What can I do for you?”

“The main problem is we have no convenient way of traveling through time, which it seems we need to do now. You're our only hope of that, so please tell us if you can manage it.”

Wait, is there an inconvenient way to do it?

She hesitated. “That's a tricky subject.”

“So you can do it, then, is what you're saying.”

“To a degree, yes. You have to understand, from my perspective right now this is happening in a dream. That's how I can have such control of my surroundings. However, all of you influence me on a subtle level, which keeps me grounded and experiencing the same things you do. When I travel in time, and I have practiced that skill along with all the others I've discovered, that grounding is... lessened. Basically, the further from the present I go, the more dreamlike things seem. Now, taking a bunch of people along with me might help, or it might be worse, we'd have to try it. As long as they concentrated on their surroundings and purpose, reality might hold for them and we could change the past in a few ways. But if your thoughts start to wander, I'm not sure the changes will stick.”

“Then we'll have to try it. We're here, so it must work out somehow. I'll send some spirit hunters to practice with you so you can all go back in time once we figure out what we're going to do to Charna.”

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“Now wait just a second,” I protested. “Why spirit hunters? My friends and I are going to want to see this through to the end.”

Mr DeLefeu shook his head. “If you go back in time to mess with Charna there’s a chance you’ll have to face her in combat. Spirit hunters have the best chance of doing that and living to tell the tale.”

“I think you’re underestimating me,” I said angrily, “and my friends. To prove it, I’ll beat your best spirit hunter, right here, right now.”

He glared at me. “I noticed you had the same tattoo you gave Osman, do you think that alone will suffice?”

“That alone? No. But that’s not the only trick I have up my sleeve.”

“You couldn’t even win against Yasui as I recall.”

“What? You know about that?”

“Of course. As a descendent of Cain your development is of great interest to Foundation scholars. We’re all looking to see how far you’ll go, Dean, so naturally your combat ability is being measured as well. Beating a couple of devils doesn’t mean you’re invincible, especially after losing to a true martial artist.”

“That’s why I created two new talismans for myself, to account for those weaknesses. I have confidence I’ll be able to take on anyone you throw at me.”

“All right, I’ll indulge you, but if you lose I don’t want to hear any complaining.”

“No sir!” I said, excited. “Do you mind if we have the same guy who did my battle before? He did a great job on the forest.”

“Oh, I thought you said you would take them here in the real world. You’re not afraid of real combat, are you?”

“No I’m not,” I answered. “But this weapon isn’t about subtlety, and accidentally killing someone isn’t how I want this mission to begin.”

He said he would come up with someone by tomorrow and we could have our fight in the evening. He would also get the same ESPer and join us in the meld so he could see me fight for himself. I wanted a quiet place to think, so I teleported to my room at my parent’s house and thought about things.

Fighting a spirit hunter, I thought. I’ve never even seen one fight before. I knew they had a variety of powers, and each one was different, meaning unlike more straightforward powers like that of the spirit energist, you never knew what you might face. And they had some kind of chants or something they could perform, to produce a variety of effects. Still, with

my reflexes and speed thanks to my foot talisman and my weapon and beaver's barrier, I was pretty confident. I probably wouldn't mess around with spirit clones, just get in there and take him out fast. My thoughts turned to what we were going to do back in the past. Then somehow I started thinking about Yasui. We both knew the spirit clone technique. Even if we weren't dating, I wondered if I could convince her we could use our spirit clones to safely have-

"Dean, is that you?"

I gave a jump, losing my train of thought. My father was softly knocking at the door, cracking it open.

"Yeah, it's me, sorry I came in this way, I just wanted some time to think."

"You don't have to try and avoid us or anything, we are your parents."

"I know, but it is hard. I've got a lot on my mind right now, and I just felt I should be here for some reason."

He sat down next to me. "Girl trouble?"

Now what was I thinking about before he came in? I thought to myself. "Not right now, it's a little more serious than that."

"Anything I can help with?"

I was about to say no, but then looked at him.

"What?"

"Didn't you say that devil made you create all kinds of stuff for him?"

"Yeah, that's why he wanted us. He made me do alchemy stuff for him while your mother made him talismans of one sort or another. He then used them to make deals in exchange for souls. Easy enough to impress someone without powers by giving them a talisman in exchange for their soul when they die. Nasty business, but what could we do? Why do you ask?"

"Well, we're stumped on something, and maybe one of those things you've made will fit the bill!" I was getting excited. "We need to seal away someone's powers so they don't end the world two years ago. The problem is they can't know we're doing it until it's too late. Is there anything like that?"

He looked confused. "You... what?"

I told him as much of the story as I could, and he listened attentively. "You've been doing all that?" he asked, impressed.

"It just seemed like it needed to be done at the time. It was no big deal."

"I guess," he said, uncertainly, scratching his head. "As long as it's been approved by the principal, I guess I could give you some of this stuff. Just wait here a second."

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He got up to leave the room, but a question popped into my head. “How did you know I was up here, anyway?”

“Spirit sense. Did no-one ever say you radiate power like nothing else?”

“Oh.”

He left, and I sat for a moment. I heard him downstairs talking to someone, then a couple of minutes later he came back up.

“Sorry about that, not that I don’t trust you or anything, but I did have to call the school and make sure.”

“I know it sounds fantastical, but it is true.”

“So the principal said. You have to be careful with this stuff, understand- I don’t have an antidote for it!”

He said “Compartment. Powerless precipitate,” and stuck his hand into nothing. I jerked back, and he pulled out a small vial of silvery liquid from thin air.

“OH CRAP!” I yelled, mentally kicking myself. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Thought that might impress you. Your mother did it for me,” he said, tapping his leg.

I reached into my pouch. “Bloodiron Pipe number six,” I said, drawing out a long length of the stuff.

“Oh,” he said, disappointed. “I guess you know about it already.”

“The principal made a bag like this, so I just copied it. I didn’t even consider making it a tattoo, so I could just reach my hand out and grab anything inside. Oh well, live and learn. By the way, want some bloodiron? I have a bunch of it still left in here.”

He whistled. “That stuff is really useful. How did you get it?”

I told him how Albert and my friends and I had cleaned out the place where the world tree was, and he looked at me in awe. “You do get around, don’t you?”

“So what’s that stuff?” I asked him, setting the pipe down on the floor and getting out some others for him.

“This is a special poison I created. Put it in a liquid someone is going to drink within the next half hour and it’ll start to take effect. Basically it makes it harder and harder to use powers over the course of a couple of years, until finally you’re almost powerless. Great for revenge, he said. If you can really travel through time, go back five years and slip her this. By the time three years go by it’ll be too late, her powers will be diminished almost to the point of uselessness.”

“She had a lot of them. Does it work on all powers at once?”

“Yes. It actually damages the spirit energy conduits in the body, so you can’t spend energy on powers as easily. But it happens too slowly to notice, and by the time you do, it’s too late.”

“Devious. Why a half hour?”

“Oh, everything I made for him took me twice as long because I was building some kind of limitation into it. I didn’t want him just feeding this stuff to anybody, or let it sit around for years, so once it hits another liquid it starts to break down, and after half an hour it’s gone.”

“Nice one.”

“Thanks.”

I took the vial and put it into my pouch. “Thank you. This solves a huge problem of ours, now we have what we need to make sure our present stays the way it is.”

“The principal also told me you’ll be fighting a spirit hunter?”

“Mock fighting, but yes.”

“I don’t really know what a spirit hunter is, but will you be okay?”

I laughed. “I haven’t even shown my friends this, come outside.”

I grabbed an apple from a bowl on the table and said hello to my mother, who was coming up from the basement. She hugged me and asked me how I was doing, and we talked for a minute. I told them both to come outside, as an artificer herself I knew my mother would appreciate this. I told my father to hold the apple by the stem, out at his side. I walked six paces away then spun and said “accelerate.”

“Drop it any time,” I said, watching my father’s fingers on the apple. From my perspective he waited, and waited, then suddenly dropped it. I blurred over to him, grabbed the apple that had just started to fall, and ran back to where I was. I turned the talisman off again and felt the world speed up. They stared at me.

“I think I’ll be okay.”

I stayed awhile longer and talked, then went back to the school feeling much better. All I had to do now was prove I could take an experienced fighter like a spirit hunter, in battle, and I could deliver my father’s creation to Charna personally.

The next day after classes I met with Mr DeLefeu and an older boy dressed like Sherlock Holmes, no lie. He even had the hat and was carrying a magnifying glass. We both looked a little surprised to see who our opponent

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was, and he shook my hand quite cordially. I assessed his spirit energy and it seemed his glass had more energy than he did. In fact, it had almost as much energy as I did! Put together he had more than me, which not many people did.

Weird, I thought. I saw him glance at my pocket, where I kept my dragon talisman, and almost laughed. He was doing the same thing to me, and it was to his credit he didn't just drop out right then. My dragon had a lot of energy I could pull out.

"When I heard I was selected to go on a mission, and then fight for the opportunity to go I expected some brute with no manners at all. This is quite a surprise!"

"And you're a spirit hunter, then?" I asked. "You don't seem to fit my image of them."

"Quite. My fellow spirit hunters tease me endlessly, but my abilities earn respect. My name is Blane, it's nice to meet you."

"I'm Dean, nice to meet you too. I thought spirit hunters used swords and things, is that really your weapon?"

"Oh yes. My family has been detectives for many generations, so don't let my weapon fool you. I'll put up a good fight, don't you worry."

"Good. I need to prove myself to Mr DeLefeu to go on this mission, so no hard feelings when I win. Just so you know, I'm going all out, so this battle won't take long."

"I was going to say the same, as a point of pride. Let the better man win, then."

"Agreed."

"Good luck to both of you," said Mr DeLefeu. "I'll be watching from the sidelines to see how you each do."

"As I'm the one demanding the trial, I'll let you choose the location," I said to Blane.

"Thank you. If you don't mind, just something flat and uninteresting. As we're both just going to go all out, might as well not put anything in the way, yes?" I nodded. "Splendid. If you don't mind though, put us a distance apart, I'd like to call out my ultimate weapon before I begin."

"Fine by me," I said. "I'd like to ready some things myself."

"There's no problem with that, is there?" he asked the ESPer.

He shook his head. "It's your show."

"Then let us begin!"

The ESPer put his hands on our heads, and Mr DeLefeu put a hand on my back, and I found myself standing on a flat plane, seemingly hanging in space.

“Acceleration,” I said immediately, and got ready to battle!

I wanted to observe this guy a little, see what powers his glass had, so I was glad I had plenty of unseen wards made. Cheating? Not really. I called a single spirit clone out in front of me, then slapped one on myself. It looked like my opponent was holding his glass aloft and shouting something, but I didn't waste any time and tried to call out my spirit projection. As it was tied to me, rather than my clone, the clone could move around normally without worrying about how far away the beaver was. It failed, so I activated my talisman and tried again, succeeding this time as expected. Hopefully he was too busy with his own thing, so to his perspective the only thing I had done was call the beaver out. Hopefully he hadn't noticed my clone being created, given how much faster than him I was moving currently.

He started walking towards me, so I grabbed an accelerate ward out of my pouch and slapped it on the beaver, making him blur a little and speeding him up too. I looked over at Blane, his glass had gotten huge, he was carrying it over one shoulder like an ax. How the heck did he swing that thing, anyway? Or maybe he didn't use it as a weapon?

“Are you ready then?” he said a few paces away from me.

I backed away from my clone, knowing he could use spirit sense to find me even while not seeing me physically, by sensing my energy. But if I stayed behind myself, he might not realize what he was feeling. *Or wait, does it make him ignore that too? I'll have to check into that sometime.*

“Power,” we both whispered, activating the dragon talisman, the final one we would need, just in case. I figured I would freak him out a little, so instead of answering I did a sending to him.

Whenever you're ready, I thought at him.

He cocked his head, then brought the glass up over his head and started to swing it down at my clone. The battle was on!

Oh, so that's how he swings it, I thought to myself, as the glass descended towards my clone. Even with my clone's talisman, it almost hit him, though it was hard to be sure if I was showing off or not. It's possible I was. I would have. The glass narrowly missed the clone, smashing into the ground where he was standing and putting a dent in it. Blane blinked and looked over to where my clone was, suddenly 20 feet away. “You're fast,” he remarked, hefting the glass again.

“Thanks,” said my clone. “You almost got me there, you weren't kidding about going all out. Armor.”

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I guess he wasn't showing off, that guy nearly got my clone, I thought. I was going to rely solely on my speed, but I guess he's feeling a little pressured.

My beaver scampered out of his reach, and I followed to make sure he could stay behind my clone, to maintain the illusion. Naturally I was faster, so it worked out well, with us once again in a line facing away from him.

“Can the glass do anything else?” my clone asked. “Because if so, I’ll give you one more chance, then I’m finishing this.”

Blane laughed. “You’re too kind, sir! Very well, take this!” He held the glass upright and it glowed, lancing an energy beam out towards where we all were. My beaver reacted just as he was supposed to, creating a barrier between us of crackling white energy.

Oh crap, I thought as the energy beam easily pierced the barrier. Maybe I should have had him practice that skill some more.

We all jumped to the side, my clone and I easily dodging the blast, and I dismissed my projection as it looked like he was about to be hit. *At least now I know what to expect, I thought.*

“You’re doing pretty well,” he said, starting to lower the glass again. “Not many dodge my attacks twice like that.”

“I was about to say the same,” my clone said. “Didn’t expect you to get through my barrier like that. Live and learn, my turn.”

He snapped, and wind energy erupted around where Blane was standing. We were both quite far from him now, having dodged away from two of his attacks, so it was rather large. Probably about eight meters across, unless I missed my guess, no dodging that! He still tried, twisting around, and somehow seemed to avoid the brunt of the attack. When it dissipated, I was shocked to see he was barely wounded, and to top it off, the wounds seemed to be closing already!

No wonder spirit hunters are so feared in combat, I nervously thought. This guy took that blast head on and he's still standing? He's a monster!

With my speed, I knew there was no way he could do anything before I could hit him a few more times, and I decided to attack with my clone, and forget anything fancy. This guy needed to be taken down, now! I was planning on letting the clone do all the fighting, just for the irony value, but with this guy’s insane resistance to my attacks, I was in danger of being outclassed. *Wonder if Yasui would have this trouble?* I thought. Would he shrug off physical blows like he is with my energy attack?

We both attacked in a rhythm, keeping him off balance, slamming him with air again and again before he could even blink. Our first barrage messed him up pretty bad, but amazingly he was still standing. Our second one cut him up even worse, leaving his entire body a mass of bruises. His head had taken a lot of damage, I couldn't believe he was still standing after all that.

It's not real, I thought. *He's standing in the room, perfectly safe*. My stomach rolled a little, it looked so real, and he was bleeding pretty badly.

"Enough," he said, dropping his glass. "He's got me."

The room reappeared, and everything was back to normal. Blane eyed me suspiciously. "Do you have any demon blood in you?" he asked coldly.

"No, it's all talismans," I answered. *Oh right, they hate demons like nobody's business, don't they?*

"I guess you've proven your point," Mr DeLefeu said. "The mission is yours."

"Thank you," I answered.

"No way," said Blane, not buying it. "You were hitting me way too fast for that to be just a simple talisman. I've never been attacked like that before."

"That's easily explained," I said, stepping back. "Spirit clone!"

"Hi," said a clone, appearing next to me.

"You were actually fighting a clone at first, I started attacking along with him after you survived the first blast. I was invisible at the time." I pulled out an ignore ward and stuck it on.

He just stared at where I had been, then turned and walked off in a daze. "I didn't even hit him once," he muttered, "it was a clone." He was still muttering to himself as he walked down the hallway.

"I think I broke him," I said, concerned.

"He'll be fine. Even considering your clone, how did you hit him so fast?"

"A talisman, like I said," putting my hand in my pouch. "Acceleration ward." I said, pulling the ward out. "I adapted this ward into a talisman, and because the strength of the effect depends on how exactly one can make talismans, the effect for me is very strong. Just like how fast someone gets when I hit them with one of these has gone up as I've gotten better at making wards. I'll probably never make wards as well as talismans though, so I guess others just miss out."

"I guess," he replied, skeptical. "A deal's a deal, whenever you're ready to go, the mission is yours."

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“Thank you,” I said, happy to have convinced him. But happier still that my talisman tattoos had proven themselves in combat against a very tough opponent. I felt ready for anything.

Dangerous Games

Two go in... three come out!

“It’s too risky,” said Mr DeLefeu the next day. My friends and I were in his office discussing the plan to make sure she could be beaten when the time was right, and he just wasn’t listening to reason.

“I say it’s too risky for more than one person to go. I can be ignored, I can phase. Just find me a place where she was and I’ll go in when she’s eating. Steal the golem out from under her nose with a contain ward. She gets up to investigate why she feels it’s gone, I make my way back to where she’s eating. I hear her coming back, slip the poison in, and get out. Simple.”

“It’s not simple,” he said. “Albert, tell them what happened in that cave you guys got ambushed in walking to the tree.”

“She had set up this cave with a circle on the ceiling that you could pass through, but not out of. It turned off everyone’s powers.”

“Turned off! You’re afraid she’ll have any hideouts rigged the same way.”

“Exactly.”

“Wait, the tree was just sitting there, there was no cave when we went.”

“We were able to go through the ‘back door’ so to speak. She had the island pretty well warded the first time we tried to go there. We got dumped on the far side and had to fight the whole way there.”

“So what happened?”

“I knew it was going to turn my powers off, but I didn’t realize I couldn’t get out afterwards, so I went down on a ladder I had made to investigate without properly preparing. I got stuck down there. Very stupid of me, but now I know to think things through properly and have things prepared even if I don’t think I’ll need them.”

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“Smart.”

“We’ll have to use two teams,” said Mr DeLefeu, “And catch her away from her hideout with the poison team. The other team will go grab her golem. She’ll have less control of the situation that way, and hopefully not realize what’s happened until it’s too late.”

“Is there some way we could put an inactive copy of her golem in place of the real one? Make her think it just failed somehow?”

“If I got a good look at it I could probably just wish one up,” said Sadye. “And if we’re splitting up, whoever poisons her drink will have to have a razor like focus. I won’t be there to back them up so they may slip into a more dreamlike state.”

“You said the further back you go, the more likely that is?” Sadye nodded.

“The solution only needs a couple of years to work... how about it Christina, are you up for that part of the mission? You probably have the strongest will of any of us in the room, if what your teachers tell me is true.”

She nodded.

“Okay. Now, as you know, she attended Foundation meetings in one guise or another since, well, ever. We can check the last couple of years of their meetings with the Time Frame, if you’ll loan it to us, Yasui. She must have had a glass of water or a soda at some point we could get at. The problem is finding her golem at the same time so both things can be done simultaneously. We have one advantage at this point; she’s dead, so not actively resisting our efforts. We can find a good time to strike, then have some seers use seeking to ask where her golem was, and then make further plans.”

“So let’s get started!” I said.

“Not so fast, Dean. Christina will need to also be invisible and phased, so you’ll probably have to create another phase talisman for her.”

“Actually,” I said, “I can just borrow the one I made for Veta last year. I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“You made another one of those things last year?”

“It was her reward for helping me... uh, that is to say, gather evidence against that unholy chosen that killed me. Let’s not dwell on the past.”

“She’s the one who helped you break into my office,” he said, grumpily.

“No, that was all me. Technically she just helped me break into your computer.”

“You’re not helping your case,” said Yasui, giggling.

“Anyway, go ask her. The other talisman or ward she’ll need will be to help her avoid detection from seers. There’s always at least one present at meetings, and they can see through invisibility. They’re all pretty good, but you keep bragging about how great a talisman maker you are, Dean, so I’ll leave that in your capable hands.”

My eyes lit up. “I know right where to find it, too! There’s a pretty sweet one I’ve been wondering if I should make that would do the trick, no question! One question!”

“Yes?”

“Would a seer in this case be counted as an ESPer?”

“Probably, why?”

“Well, in the book it specifically says “ESPer powers” as I recall, but being able to see invisible things is a seer power. But as seers are just specialized ESPers...”

Mr DeLefeu thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what, there is a ward called immunity, that can make someone immune to a certain power, chosen when you make it. I can provide you with one of those before you leave, and Dean can make you the talisman so if there’s an ESPer there, they don’t sense you with ESP. You’re pretty good with spirit manipulation, right Christina?”

“I had to be, to start learning to unlock my spirit grades.”

“Good, you’ll also have to push your power down so someone that’s good at spirit sense doesn’t detect you.”

“This plan relies on a lot of variables.”

“There’s nothing for it. So many powers can detect you, we just have to try and make you immune to as many as we can.”

“Especially considering the person you want to poison probably has most of them herself.”

“Fair point.”

“I’ll get to work,” I said. “By the way, I don’t suppose all this effort will translate into grades or other such rewards, will it?”

“You can have all the good feelings that you saved the lives of everyone on Earth that you want.”

“That’ll look good on my résumé.”

He laughed. “I’ll think of something. Anyway, don’t you already have a job offer?”

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So he took the picture frame that could look into the past from Yasui and had a Foundation agent watch the meeting room for possible opportunities to strike at her from the past several years. I got busy creating a new psychic barrier charm, a simple sphere, and figured I would make it for myself and make it good, then just loan it to Christina. I was putting the effort in, another couple of days of work wouldn't matter. When it was finished no ESPer would ever trouble me again. Not that any had, except for that one that had killed me, of course. He hadn't used ESPer power for that though. Making it took me a good three weeks, but in the end I had Katrina try to use her powers on me, and they all failed, meaning it worked perfectly. It was then I realized the glaring hole in my genius plan: One of my friends could only talk to me through ESPer powers. Whoops. It was a simple enough matter to remove it when Osman was around, but I felt a little stupid after Osman said Kat was trying to talk to me, why was I ignoring her? I turned the clasp into an alligator clip instead. It was small enough, so I could wear it as an earring, making it easier to take off. Of course I couldn't wear it around school, but once Osman and I parted ways I could just clip it in with my other talismans and not worry about it anymore. I went back and forth, actually, deciding if I should just make it permanent or energy based. Given the "silent" nature of most ESPer powers, I figured being defended against memory alteration or compulsion at all time was worth the extra effort.

The Foundation agent looking into things found some nice times when Charna had not only been there, but gotten a drink, then left it unattended for long enough that it could be drugged. seers then took those times and looked into the location of her golem and we went with the frame to scope the places out. She did seem to move around a lot, I guess she was a little paranoid? The most promising one was just a regular looking house in Maine. It had apparently been abandoned since the incident, making it a lot easier to get into and have a look around. We all went there and checked the place out, and sure enough, stepping inside made our powers go away. We ripped up the carpets and found the wards responsible, so we knew we would have to somehow get the golem to come outside to capture it. We watched her walk around doing chores in the house with the Time Frame, and seemed to get a lucky break. As she was cleaning she came outside to spray something with a hose before going back in. We all smiled as we watched, it was coming together!

Sadye studied the golem for a while and created an exact looking duplicate, and I shoved it inside a contain ward so I didn't have to lug it around. We were there going over the plan the day before we were going to carry out the mission, when Yasui asked why we didn't see ourselves stealing the golem. Presumably, if we were looking into the past, we would.

"Sadly I am not fully versed in the intricacies of time travel," I answered. "Having never done it before. I suppose because we haven't done it from our point of view, yet? I don't know."

"I just would like to know if we succeed or not, that's all. I just hope not seeing ourselves here in the past isn't a bad omen, like we should be looking at a different location."

"If that's the case, something will stop us from going back in time in the first place, and we'll make a new plan."

"So here's the final plan," Mr DeLefeu said that night. "It's not complex, so we at least have that going for us. Sadye will create a door in time, allowing Christina to go through invisible and warded, do the job, and come back. This door will be opened on the side of the house, so you'll be hidden from view. She'll step through first and use a teleportation ward to get to the Foundation building. The door will be set so she has five minutes to get in, mess with the drink, and get out before Charna finishes it. She's done practice runs phased, so that should be more than enough time.

"Dean, you, Yasui, and Osman will step through and wait 13 minutes for the golem to step out. By that time Christina will have used the second teleport ward to get back and step through the door. Remember, if you attack something you'll become visible again, and Charna of the past could track you. She can't know how or when she was poisoned, or she could work out how and then make some kind of antidote. With you resistant or immune to seer powers for the duration, that should be enough.

"At thirteen minutes in the golem comes out and starts using the hose in the back yard. Charna chose the house well, it's surrounded on all sides with a fence, so no one would see the golem if it had to go out. That's when you'll contain the real golem and plant the fake one. Head back through the time door, and the future works out the way Albert and the others experienced. Remember, at all times to not let your thoughts stray- Sadye says if you do, reality may start seeming more and more dreamlike, and this might not actually affect the real past at all. Any questions?"

"What will the door look like? Should we be concerned with someone seeing it?" asked Osman.

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“No, it’ll just be a two dimensional hole, and I’ll put it as close to the side of the house as I can. You won’t be able to see it from the street at all.”

“We’re sure there are no guards at the house?”

“We’ve checked it all over with the Time Frame, every room. It’s just the golem and her there at the time. We don’t see any wards outside the house, which could mean they’re hidden someplace, but we’ve been poking around so much if they were there, we think we would have triggered them by now.”

“Also,” said Osman, “Kat seems very good at picking stuff like that out, so I’m confident there’s nothing.”

“Anything else?”

We all shook our heads.

“Okay. We’ll meet at the front of the school next saturday at ten o’clock, and proceed from there. Until then, polish your skills, go over the plan in your mind, and get ready. We have no idea what other traps there may be around there, or if she will somehow know the minute someone steps onto that property, so be careful.”

A week and a half later we all stood in position by the house and waited. Christina was invisible and warded, wearing my psychic barrier talisman on her ear. I was also ignored, and holding the contain ward I would use when the golem stepped out of the house. Yasui and Osman both had acceleration wards on, and were anxious to get started. Sadye looked at us and we nodded.

“Good luck,” said Mr DeLefeu. “Don’t screw it up.”

We all laughed a little, and Sadye concentrated. Mr DeLefeu was holding the Time Frame in the position and time we wanted, and a slight shimmer appeared in the air.

“It’s open,” she said.

I looked, and couldn’t tell, the side of the house hadn’t changed that much in a couple of years, after all. When we all stepped through, we got turned around and were stepping away from the house, so it must have worked. I concentrated on the mission, and what I was going to do in it, fixing the events in my mind as though I was remembering them rather than anticipating them. Sadye said this would help keep reality steady here in the past, and we all hugged the corner of the house and waited.

Half the time went by, and I saw a chess piece, the queen, sail out of thin air and land next to us, the agreed upon signal that Christina was going back. I picked it up and tucked it in my pocket. The plan thus far was working. I

edged around the house, unnecessary perhaps as I was ignored, but we felt taking any chances at all was too great a risk, given who we were about to steal from. The yard was empty, with a high wooden fence around the property, with the gate on the side opposite from us. Four large plastic trash cans sat next to the hose, which was by the step leading into the house. The minutes ticked past, I knew it wouldn't be long before the golem stepped out, and yes, I heard the door open.

Show time- the lady made of marble stepped down from the house and set down the plastic meshing she was going to spray with the hose. I knew I had exactly 83 seconds before she went back in the house, plenty of time to use the ward and pull it in. After that I could mostly relax as then it was just setting up the duplicate, which wouldn't fight back.

I concentrated on my skill of spirit manipulation, so I took a second and focused on that. I needed to put a lot of energy into this ward, as I would only get one shot at this. I crept closer and when I was near, touched the golem with it, activating it with the energy I was holding. It didn't even turn its head as it vanished and the hose went wild, which is of course when everything fell to pieces.

From the trash cans by the house burst four metal looking creatures that could only be vessels. I had worked with enough bloodiron to recognize it right away. They were like robots, with elongated heads, no faces, and blades for both arms and legs. To make matters worse, the house, the yard, basically everything in the immediate area disappeared, meaning Yasui and the others no longer had a house to hide behind. The vessels took to the air and rushed them. Glancing around I saw we were apparently in the Demon World somehow, a rather empty plane with just some small rocks and low brush dotting the landscape.

I should have wondered why one person living here alone would need four trash cans, I thought, kicking myself mentally and quickly shoving the ward into my pouch. Didn't want it getting torn by accident and releasing the golem again before we got home. They're going to need my help!

Osman raised a hand, his habit probably saving us now, as Yasui yelled at him, "They explode, remember? Don't kill them!" as she got into a defensive stance.

"Crap, you're right!" he yelled, and redirected his attack toward one of their arms. It hit, though the vessel tried to get out of the way, and while it messed the arm up, it wasn't torn off.

“Spirit clone!” yelled Yasui, and two clones appeared to either side of her.

“Can you do something?” one of them yelled to Sadye.

She got no answer, but couldn’t stop to think about it as the vessels were almost upon her.

The vessels seemed a little confused by the sudden appearance of the clones though, maybe they weren’t too bright?

I hate to show them this, but they’re going to need my speed, I thought. “Acceleration!” I said, blurring into action. I wouldn’t reach the nearest one before it could attack, I was sure, but it wouldn’t get more than one, I hoped.

Two vessels swooped in and aimed for each clone, each which tried to dodge. One managed it, the other didn’t, and got slammed in the right arm, disappearing. I dodged around those two, the one almost seeming to radiate even more confusion than before, and tried to reach the one that was now going for Yasui before it had a chance to strike. I touched it just as the blade arm came down towards her. Yasui disappeared at the last second, shouting “Over here!” several meters away.

I didn’t even follow that movement! I thought, concentrating on ripping the soul from this thing with soul extracting. Luckily, as expected the soul seemed almost eager to be free of this particular “container” and I easily pulled it out. The vessel smashed to the ground with a clang, inert. Sadly, this also caused my ignore ward to burn up, and the others swung around to orient on me.

Whoops.

At the same time, Osman fired off another blast of wind, again targeting the arm of the one he went for before, but missed this time, as the vessel seemed to anticipate this.

The only Yasui clone left also disappeared, reappearing in the opposite direction and shouting to attract attention. One swiveled to orient on her, and went flying.

The old divide and conquer bit, huh? Suits me.

I put another ignore ward on myself as I dropped the soul. I didn’t have time to do anything else with it, so I wished hard that it wouldn’t just be attracted back into the vessel again. It wasn’t, but neither did it disappear. Usually a soul with no container migrates as normal, but I didn’t have time to think about it, I still had three more souls to pull out. I figured I’d target the one Osman was trying to disassemble, it looked about ready to attack him now. I was more confident of Yasui’s chances to dodge than his.

I was a split second too late, the vessel took a slash at him with the undamaged right blade, but it must have been off balance, as Osman dodged it easily. I reached it, coming from the right in case Osman started taking shots at it before I managed to yank the soul. I put my hand on it and again concentrated, hoping this soul wouldn't be any more eager to stay than the first. Sadly, I totally bombed that try, I felt the energy for the attempt go haywire, and nothing happened but me turning visible again. I swear the thing didn't turn its head or anything, but still became aware of me.

Albert must have forgotten to mention they had all around vision, I thought, given they didn't have eyes but were sill tracking us regardless.

At the sides of the battlefield the two other vessels slashed at Yasui and clone, both which missed, with the two dancing to the side and uselessly mocking their efforts.

Did you forget it got one of your clones right off?

As I still had my hand on the one, it hadn't managed to turn more than fractionally, I again tried to pull the soul out of it. This time my power behaved a little better, and once again I had a glowing ball in my hand, and the vessel fell, unpowered.

"See if you can get in touch with... crap he didn't even know Albert five years ago, never mind." I said to Osman. "Just stay here." I started towards the Yasui I hoped wasn't the clone, in the confusion I may have gotten them switched in my mind. It was just about to raise an arm and slash at Yasui when I reached over to grab it, and it dodged out of the way instead.

Oh right, I forgot to put another ward on, I thought.

The other one slashed at the other Yasui, which she just barely managed to dodge.

Suddenly the one in front of me slammed into the ground, and the little blade legs waved madly to try and get up. *Kat's work, no doubt, I thought. Hold it right there.*

That time I managed to touch it easily, and my power cooperated, and then three souls were free. I hastily let it go and it also just hung there, so I turned my attention on the final vessel.

Sadly it seemed to take me as the biggest threat, and as I started running towards it, the mid-section opened up and a gun barrel stuck out. "Oh, come on!" I shouted as an energy beam struck out at me. I threw myself to the side as a huge beam rushed past me, and Yasui dodged out of the way as well, also managing to avoid the beam.

It was going to take me a second to stand up, so in desperation I yelled "Kat?" who obliged me by slamming the head of the thing back and

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into the ground. The beam went off again, straight into the sky this time. It tried to scrabble around and get up, but Katrina's telekinesis held it fast, and I lunged towards it, trying not to get cut up by the blades swinging themselves around. I concentrated, and was rewarded with a forth ball of energy being plucked from the machine, making it go silent as well.

We all stayed tense, looking about to make sure nothing else would jump out and attack us, and when it seemed like nothing would, we relaxed. I turned off my acceleration talisman and took a good look at the vessel.

"I am so glad you learned that technique," said Yasui, walking over to us and her clone. (Or the other way around) "They might have slaughtered us otherwise."

"Oh, I'm sure Osman could have taken them all out himself, it's just the explosions afterwards that would have concerned me."

"How did we get here, anyway?" asked Osman, walking over. "And why aren't those souls going anywhere?"

"Both excellent questions," I answered. "And as soon as I wrap these vessels up so they don't come back to life somehow, we can look for answers to those very questions."

I got out four contain wards and put one vessel in each, then put them in my pouch.

"I can only carry one soul at a time," I said, "though I could try putting them in my pouch, I suppose."

"Leave them for now," said Yasui, looking around. "Figure a way to get us back to Earth first. Can you do that, Sadye?"

Again there was no answer.

"You don't suppose she woke up, do you?"

"We better hope not, or we're stuck here."

"She should still be able to come get us. She knows the time we're in, anyway, right? Wasn't it her power keeping us here anyway? If she woke up, wouldn't we have gone back to our own time?"

I shook my head. "I have no idea. We can't stay here, heck we can't stay in the Demon World at all, it's too dangerous. But I have no clue how we're going to get home."

"Teleportation, as a last resort," said Katrina, appearing.

"Hey, thanks for keeping those two down for me."

"Sure, no problem."

"Now what were you saying about Teleportation?"

"The ultimate expression of Teleportation is across dimensions," she explained. "I learned that from my angel knowledge. Basically, you would

have to give all of us the spirit of the ant so we could help you, then give yourself hummingbird and just keep trying until we got it right.”

“I don’t know, my skill at doing what the animal spirits give me is equal to my skill at calling them. Which is terrible, along with everything else I can do apart from artificer stuff. But if it’s the only way, we can try it.”

“As we’re in the Demon World, I can’t even petition an ophan to come get us. Not that I could explain how we got here in the first place,” said Osman.

“Well we better think of something soon. Charna probably knows her golem is gone, and will come looking for it. She’ll probably know right where to look, too. She sent us here, after all.”

“Is this the Demon World?” asked Yasui, or the clone. “The sky isn’t all weird.”

We all looked up and saw she was right, the sky looked normal, very unlike the sky in the Demon World we had seen before. We were all staring up, trying to figure out what to do now, when suddenly the real sky appeared and we were back where we started.

I quickly looked down and saw the souls in the positions I had left them in, and they vanished. Sadye ran over to us.

“You guys are okay? Where have you been, I’ve been so worried!”

We looked around, confused. “I don’t even know. Let’s get out of here and discuss it later!”

Leaving a fake golem doesn’t seem to have any point now, her four vessels will be missing, and even having Sadye make some garbage cans, we won’t get them in place in time. Oh well.

I hastily got out the contain ward with the fake golem and set it up near the hose, which was still spewing water like mad.

“Okay, let’s go.”

We all jumped through the hole and Sadye closed it behind us, making us breathe a sigh of relief: We had done it!

End of dreaming

“It’s either real or it’s a dream.

There is nothing in between.”--Electric Light Orchestra

“I take it you had some trouble?” asked Mr DeLefeu. “You do all seem to be in one piece though, which is good.”

“We wound up in some weird space for a couple of minutes while we fought off four vessels. I’ve got them in contain wards, if you want to study them.”

“Study them?” he said, taking a step back. “What in the world did you bring them here for? Even contained like that, if they got loose-”

“Don’t worry, I took the souls out first.”

“Oh, don’t scare me like that.”

“So where did we go, anyway?” asked Osman. “And Christina, you were successful?”

“We’ll know if the FuturePast dream stops, I guess. But yes, I slipped the poison in her drink like we planned.” She handed me my talisman back, and I put it in my pouch in case Katrina wanted to talk to me some more. “Thanks for the loan. It was wild walking around totally invisible you know?”

“What do you mean, where did you go?” asked Mr DeLefeu.

“When the vessels jumped out at us we wound up in this weird empty space, that reminded me of the Demon World. We were trying to figure out how to get out of there when suddenly we were back, just like that.”

“It was probably magic, some kind of temporary battlefield spell so the fight didn’t attract attention, triggered by the vessels.”

“Oh, well that was nice of her.”

“So what happens now?” asked Yasui.

“We wait one week. If no one has the FuturePast dream we’ll close the holes in the shield and turn off dreamer power. It’s too dangerous. Then you take your finals and have a nice summer vacation.”

“Simple as that, huh?” asked Christina.

Mr DeLefeu smiled. “You all did great, nicely done.”

Mr DeLefeu wanted the vessels and the golem out of my contain wards as soon as possible and put under lock and key. He said to come with him down to the lower area where they had some holding cells. Yasui walked with me, a couple of steps behind him.

“So I couldn’t help but notice you seemed to be moving a lot faster than you did in our fight. And faster than we were, just now. Are we not getting the good wards or something?”

“Ah. Yes. I was afraid you would ask about that.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“It’s a talisman tattoo I made. After our fight I decided to work on one, given I’m so much better at making them than wards.”

“And you didn’t think to offer me one? You didn’t even tell me about it. Why?” she asked, a little miffed.

I sighed. “Because I knew you would want one.”

“What? Since when are you holding out on your friends?” She stopped. “It wasn’t dangerous or anything, was it?”

“Not as such, with my regeneration one- Look, this talisman is because I don’t really have any fighting skills. Oh sure, I could make a talisman weapon or learn martial arts or something, but in that respect I’m still human. I’ll never be as good as you are, not without focusing entirely on combat for a good long while and becoming a true martial artist myself. It’s different with you.”

“What are you talking about? I use your wards all the time, it’s the same thing.”

“No it isn’t. You know that my wards are just a boost you can get when I’m around, so you keep struggling to get better, right? I know you do, I’ve seen you training.”

“I... yeah.”

“But if you can just flip a switch and turn on a talisman, why bother ever getting better? You know how long I studied talisman making to get this good, right? I’m still always reading books and improving my technique. I want to see how far I can take my skills, and you should want the same with yours.”

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“So you’re doing it for my own good?”

“I’ll make you a deal. Graduation day comes, you can come to me and say ‘make me a talisman that does x’ and I’ll do it for you, no questions asked. But you have to honestly be able to tell me you’ve gone as far as you can on your own where ‘X’ is concerned. Deal?”

She looked a little mollified. “Deal.”

We started walking again to catch up. “And it is a little dangerous. I’m forcing myself into a hyper state, way further then we go with the wards. I have no idea what it does to me. I’m counting on my regeneration to counter any effects, but it still could do some damage. So I’m going to be pretty careful about using it. I wouldn’t want to cause you to hurt yourself, you don’t have regeneration.”

“Maybe I’ll just have to try and get two talismans out of you when I graduate,” she said with a little smile.

“Oh? How will you do that?”

“I could think of one or two ways...” she said with a wink.

Down in the holding cells I spilled out the four vessels and the now inert golem. We did that one last and I had another contain ward ready to suck it up again, should it still be active and try to attack us. It just heavily smashed into the floor though, and lay motionless. I put the ward away, and Mr DeLefeu looked them all over.

“Your work?” he asked, pointing to the torn up arm on one of them.

I shook my head. “Osman. He could have engulfed them all, but Yasui reminded him they exploded. He was just trying to slow them down a little, or maybe keep from being sliced to pieces. I just concentrated on stealing their souls.”

“Well, Albert will be happy. We’ll keep them down here until school ends, he can have a vessel as a graduation present. Provided they haven’t moved from this spot by then. I think he wanted one as a base for a golem, but maybe he could just save himself the work and re-animate this one. Seems a pity to let all that work go to waste, the craftsmanship on this one is great, she must have worked on it for years.”

“She did have the time, I guess. Is that possible, him making it his golem now? It was hers, wouldn’t that mess it up?”

“We would probably need a spirit energist to come draw every part of her power out of it, so that his can go in there instead. I don’t know enough about the process to tell you, actually. He would.”

“In either case he’d probably like it to study. She probably figured out a few tricks Alchemists of today don’t even know.”

“It’s possible.”

We stepped out of the cell and he closed the door, locked it, and then started putting wards around the doorframe, and then two across the crack in the door.

“All that?” I said, impressed.

“These cells are already warded against a variety of abilities, but I’m taking no chances with these things.”

“Well,” said Yasui, “after all the trouble we went through to catch them, I would hate to have them just leave without saying goodbye. That would be rude.”

We all laughed. “I’ll also get a summoner to bind with something and post a guard. I’m sure we can find a demon willing to leave the Demon World for a couple of months and watch this cell. The food would be better at least.”

I spent a tense night that night, hardly able to sleep because I wanted to know if Katrina had the dream again, but finally got some rest. I woke up to a school full of very happy seers and ESPers. Not a single one had the FuturePast dream, and everyone was buzzing about what it might mean. I knew, but I wasn’t talking.

Our good mood lasted for nearly another two days before someone broke in and stole the golem.

“Why would someone even want it?” I asked that night in Mr DeLe-feu’s office after being told the golem was gone. “It’s useless now, right?”

“As far as I could tell when we put it in there, yes. It had no spirit power at all that I could sense. I suppose it could have been sealed like your old energy talisman though. I should have checked, but honestly I didn’t want to get too close to it. I figured putting in the sealed room would be good enough.”

“That raises a question,” I said. “How did anyone know it was here in the first place?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. From the perspective of any of Charma’s followers, it would have just seemed inactive, unless the copy that Sadye made was somehow imperfect in a way they could detect. Let’s say they did figure it out, and started looking for the original. Would they still

be looking almost two years later? It was never in an unprotected space, that's what's so odd. It was inside a contain ward, then put in a pocket dimension, then put in a shielded holding cell. I don't get it."

"How did it happen?"

"As near as we can tell, two or three individuals made their way to the island just hours ago. They made their way down there and the guard reported them. After smashing their way into the cell they carried the golem out, and by the time the student soul bound to the demon got in touch with us, they were gone. We have seers and mystics looking for them, but they didn't teleport in, they arrived by plane, so we have no way of tracking them that way. And it seems their plane is warded, because it can't ever be easy."

"They're probably all warded against seer skills personally, if they worked for Charna. This is bad all right."

His phone rang, startling us. "Hello?" he said into the receiver.

"What? You've looked everywhere? Yes of course you have, stupid question. All right, keep checking to make sure there aren't any more. Thanks. Bye."

"Now what is it?"

"A student is missing. Not killed, they were too smart for that. Probably working with them. Darn it!" He slammed his fist onto the desk, but I smiled. "What?"

"If that is the case, and he wasn't in the wrong place at the wrong time, we've got them. Come on!"

Yasui, get the Time Frame and run to meet me at the principal's office, I sent. It's an emergency, so drop everything!

I started down the stairs and Mr DeLefeu ran to catch up to me. "What are you cooking up now?" he asked.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," I replied. "All in good *time*."

We waited for Yasui, who ran up not long after we got down all the stairs, and Mr DeLefeu took us to the student's room.

"Oh," he said, catching on. "You want to see who he called these last few days, thinking that if he was working with the thieves, he called them right after the golem was released from the ward."

I nodded excitedly. "With this we can get the number, and I'm sure the Foundation can find out who a phone number belongs to, one way or another. We need to get these guys fast, before they can do whatever it is they're doing with the golem."

“I agree. Start rewinding.”

“Wait,” I said. “I have a hunch. Start playback in this room just after we got back from the past.”

Yasui told the frame what time to start playback from, and the picture jumped into motion. Both roommates were in, and just a few minutes after we would have released the golem from the contain ward, one roommate looked up as a beeping was heard from his dresser drawer.

That guy said something as the other got up and opened the drawer.

The other said something in reply, then brought out a box with a flashing light on it. It had an antenna and an on/off switch, which he flipped. He closed the drawer and must have said he needed to make a call. He left the room, leaving his roommate scratching his head. We paused the playback and Mr Delefeu went and looked in the drawer, and sure enough there was the box the guy had played with. We followed him out the door and into the hall, down outside the school and out into the forest. We got some funny looks, but most people knew what the Time Frame I had made was. Yasui loved watching it all the time, after all.

Out in the forest our snitch dialed a number, and Mr DeLefeu carefully copied it down and used his cell phone to call someone, and told them to get the location of that number, and fast. The boy had a quick conversation with someone and went back into his room. He looked smug, and started throwing things into a bag.

“Looks like he knew he was leaving soon,” I remarked.

“Yes, it does look that way.” He gestured to the Time Frame. “Let’s take this down to the holding cells,” said Mr DeLefeu. “I want to see exactly how they got in and carried off the golem. That will reveal what we’re up against.”

“So the golem had some kind of radio transmitter inside it?” asked Yasui, as we walked down to the holding cells.

“Apparently,” answered Mr DeLefeu. “I didn’t think to even check for something mundane like that. Confidentially I wouldn’t even know how. You get thinking about powers and sometimes you forget things like computers and cell phones. That a woman thousands of years old would even consider putting something like that in her golem baffles the mind. I guess she really was prepared for anything.”

“And her agents were just waiting for it to resurface,” I said bitterly.

“To think they even had one here, among the students. I wonder how much influence she still has, even now.”

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“I guess there will always be people trying to end the world one way or another, for some reason.”

“Good thing we have Dean around to save us,” said Yasui.

“You know that’s right,” I said with a grin. Yasui just rolled her eyes.

We watched through the Time Frame as three people walked down the hallway towards the holding cell. We slowed it down to get a good look at them. One was obviously a cambion, with red eyes, claws, and armor like scales covering his whole body. He was wearing sweatpants and a muscle shirt, and he looked very capable. He was holding a device that looked like a radio tracker of some kind, the lights were getting brighter as he got closer to the holding cell. The second was glowing, and it was a glow I recognized; spirit grades. He looked dressed to kill, that is if he was headed for some illegal blood sport game in the Demon World. I pegged him as a true martial artist given the bulk, the guy looked totally built, and was wearing some kind of loose martial art garb. The third looked very much out of place next to these guys, and looked dressed to kill in quite a different way. He was wearing a tailored suit, expensive shoes, and his watch probably cost more than my first car probably would.

The cambion asked the others something, and the man in the suit answered him. He gestured and a glowing circle appeared underneath them all, then vanished.

Oh great, a magic user, I thought.

The muscle man stopped in front of the cell with all the wards plastered over it.

The cambion said something, holding his tracker up. All the lights were lit on it now.

Muscle man said something, pointing to all the wards. He looked the door over.

I looked it over too, where it was currently torn off the hinges and tossed aside like a scrap of paper. I was curious what he would do to it, and he took a step back.

“Hya!” he obviously shouted, smashing a fist into it, and the fist won. The door crumpled like paper and twisted off its hinges, leaving space for the guy to grab it and tear it off the wall like nothing. He tossed it aside.

“DANG!” said Yasui, impressed. “Who is this guy?”

The cambion looked around nervously and said something.

Mr DeLefeu paused the Time Frame. “I think we’re in more serious trouble than we thought,” he said, the blood leaving his face.

“What is it?” I asked, concerned.

“At the last, she said she would be back. She seemed certain of it, Albert and the others all said so. This was her backup plan: hide her soul inside the golem and have someone get her a new body if she fell. That’s the only thing that would explain the actions of these guys. The reason they went through all the trouble too. It explains everything.”

I realized what he was saying. “We have to catch them before they can do the transfer, or everything Albert and the others worked for will be for nothing!”

“Not to mention starting the whole search for her over again. Get pictures of those guys and come on!”

I was interested to see how they went and got the marble golem out of there, but this was more important, so I snapped some pictures while Yasui held the frame, and we started back. I had a sudden thought and stopped.

“Come on, we have to hurry!” Mr DeLefeu prompted, waving at me.

“Wait, how many teleport wards do you have on you?”

His eyes lit up. “Right, may as well use them, rather than running about.” He handed us each some. “Get your friends together, we’ll head to the Foundation building and see who’s around and if they have any information on that number. I’ll meet you at the front gate!”

He threw one down and disappeared through it. “Go get Christina,” I said, “and if you know anyone who can go up against that guy, bring them along. We’re going to need all the help we can get!”

“I don’t want to go up against that guy!” she protested. She disappeared through a ward as well.

I figured Osman would be in our room, so I went there directly. He jumped.

“No time to explain,” I said, handing him the dragon talisman. “Grab energy out of this and get Haniel here, fast, for as long as you can. I’ll explain in a minute.”

He looked confused, but took the talisman and concentrated on it, then started praying. I pulled the armor talisman out of my pack, shrugged off my shirt, and put them both on. I took a mental inventory of what I had in my pouch, I might need it all very soon.

Haniel popped into the room, surprised.

“Oh, hey guys. Is something up?”

“You better believe it!” I said, grabbing my talisman back and hooking into it myself while shoving it roughly back in my pocket. “Come on, I’ll explain in a minute!”

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Osman and Haniel followed me through yet another ward to the front of the school. Yasui and Christina were there, Christina with her bow out already.

“We’re just waiting for Mr DeLefeu, I’ll explain what’s going on,” I said, putting my hand in my pouch. I got out several acceleration wards and stuck one on everybody, under their clothes so it wasn’t noticeable. As I did that I explained. “The golem we worked so hard to capture was stolen a little while ago by three agents of Charna. A wizard, a very strong true martial artist and a cambion. We think Charna did a soul transfer or had it done, putting her soul into the golem. That’s why they broke in to steal it!”

There was a bang, and Mr DeLefeu, along with Mr Verocha, a summoner, and Mr Archer, the spirit energist, in tow. I knew Mr Archer knew at least three different martial arts, one which he had developed himself using energy manipulation, so he was a good choice.

“Everyone here? Follow me then!”

He threw down another teleport ward and we all followed him through.

21

Big Fight

*“Kako mo mirai mo gocha-maze tsuzuku batoru
Hey Girl, Hatenai yume ga boku-ra no pawaa”*

--Kiseki No Big Fight

It was a tense half hour as Foundation members called in favors, contacted spirit hunter society, wizards, anything to find out where these three had gone. Somehow they had managed it, and we were now standing down the street from an ordinary looking house in North Dakota. Osman was looking at the house now, and the occasional car that passed us on the street was full of people looking at us questioningly. I had to admit, just standing there, that we looked a little out of place. Yasui in her heavy boots, Christina’s glowing energy bow, with an arrow she had ready to fire. We were all blurry with acceleration, and of course Haniel was there, casually holding his flaming sword. Subtle was not in the cards right now.

“They are there, and they seem to be preparing something,” Osman said. “We’re not too late. Oh, and there’s a plane in the back yard. They must have teleported it here, as no way did that thing land in that tiny yard.”

I was going to breathe a sigh of relief, but hearing that made me tense up again. What were we going up against?

“How do we get in there fast enough?” Yasui asked. “We need to take them by surprise if we have any chance at all.”

“I have an idea,” said Katrina, popping up in front of me. “I’m only talking to you, Mr DeLefeu and Yasui, right now, by the way.”

“Just a second,” I said. “Katrina says she has an idea.”

“I can show you what that room looks like with illusion, that should count as seeing it well enough to teleport there.”

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“Great idea!” said Mr DeLefeu. “We’ve got our in. Everyone, get everything ready you need, we’re teleporting right into their faces!”

I started activating all my talismans.

“Inside a house?” asked Christina, making a face. “That’s not going to be the ideal situation for a bow user.” She shook her bow at us.

“If you think you should sit this one out...” said Mr Archer, whose name was not ironic at all in this situation.

“It’s okay,” I said, having the illusion of the place in my head now. “They’re in a large, open basement. There will be plenty of room to scatter and not get in each other’s way. What do you think, the side right over there?” I asked, pointing. Yasui and Mr DeLefeu looked where I was pointing.

“That seems good, most everyone here has a long range attack, no offense Yasui, maybe we can take them out before they can even react.”

“Everyone ready?” I asked. “We should each go though our own ward, rather than one at a time, and let them have it.”

“Wait!” shouted Haniel. “If I know her, she’s got her followers covering the place with more of those stupid power canceling wards! We can’t go in there!”

“You’re right,” I admitted. “But we can’t just let them continue on, they could transfer that soul any minute!”

“I’ve got an idea, hand me your dragon again, okay?” asked Osman.

I complied, wondering what he had in mind. He stood gathering energy for a moment, and I wondered just how much he was going to pull out of there. What, exactly, was he calling up to help us? I felt him also hook into his own energy talisman, and finally he seemed ready.

“With you petitioned here Haniel I might not manage this, but I think I have just enough *draw* left to work with,” he explained at last. He started praying, continuing for about a minute, and a very weird thing appeared in the air, which I recognized as an ophan.

“I’m sorry to call upon your services, but there’s a house down the street I’ll need you to open a portal into a just a moment. Three men are inside who are planning on resurrecting Charna from her soul transfer object, and we need to stop them. Are you willing?”

The ophan bobbed up and down. Seemed like he was.

“Thank you. For now please take us back to the school, one of the larger chambers, the summoning room.”

The Ophan came down to our level and turned sideways, allowing us to walk through, and we found ourselves in the summoning room beneath the school. The angel followed us.

“Now we need to get those three men here. Can you open the portal at floor level in the basement of 465 Spring Creek Road, where we just were, and just dump them here in front of us?”

Again the angel nodded, and rose up a little.

I tensed up, ready to blast them when they came through, but then thought, *wait, what?*

“Wait!” I shouted. “If you can do that, just dump them-”

Too late, they came tumbling through along with some lit candles, the golem, a tied up young girl and some small tables with stuff on them. “In a holding cell...” I finished lamely.

“Whoops,” said Osman, and raised a hand. “Sorry!”

I had never killed anyone for real before, people I mean, and even facing these guys I found I couldn’t face that prospect. I kept my wind attack small and aimed at the leg of the wizard, who I felt was the biggest threat. The three had fallen to the ground with a thud and were looking around, so we had the upper hand for the moment. These were all battle hardened fighters, so I knew we could take no chances. Even with my speed, it took enough time for the energy to appear that the wizard realized he was under attack and, flat on his back as he was, waved his arms around and said something. There was a shimmer around him, and my wind attack did nothing. He appeared totally unharmed.

Well, crap.

Christina shot an arrow at the muscular guy, who rolled out of the way and was on his feet already. By the look on his face, he wouldn’t mind murdering all of us.

Yasui shouted ‘spirit clone’ and another one of her appeared, and started running towards the true martial artist. *Good plan, feel him out*, I thought, blasting the wizard again, but once more it didn’t seem to hurt him at all.

Double Crap, wasn’t a fluke. *Now what?*

I looked over at Osman, “The cambion then!” I shouted, and we both sent blasts of wind at him. Sadly, he too zipped out of the way and was on his feet with some sort of martial arts move. He dropped into a defensive stance and glanced around, but didn’t seem intimidated by the number of opponents he faced.

The true martial artist screamed in frustration and went into his spirit grade, probably the fourth level by the feel of it, as his appearance changed radically and we were pushed back. I felt his energy go through the roof,

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easily twice what my dragon could even hold, and realized my assessment of the wizard being the most dangerous could very well be wrong.

Mr Archer put up a barrier, that helped us withstand his intense energy that was all around us, and I knew every person on the island was about to come running to see what had just happened.

Outside the barrier I saw magic circles appear under each of our opponents, and that same shimmer appeared, making me think all our opponents were now going to be immune to our wind attacks. I cursed the past me that thought reusing Osman's tattoo was a good idea. I fired off another blast, who needed a beaver spirit projection to provide barriers when you had this many spirit energists around, anyway? As expected though, they seemed unharmed and I knew we were in a little more trouble than had I counted on.

Christina, not to be outdone, went into spirit grade herself, and I saw the true martial artist give a slight nod, acknowledging her achievement. It felt I had less than half of this monster's energy, and I hoped we weren't in for a long fight here.

The Yasui clone reached the true martial artist, but was being pushed back by his power so couldn't get near him. The cambion jumped at her instead, and they traded blows, neither giving an inch, and I was almost sure she scored on his right arm, at least a little.

Both Mr DeLefeu and Mr Archer sent energy blasts at the martial artist, one of which missed but the other which hit him in the body, which as expected did nothing.

He can increase his defense with energy, I thought. Just like Yasui did when I hit her. How are we going to whittle this guy down enough to take him?

I returned to my mental inventory for a second, what did I have that I could use against these guys? Osman sent another blast of wind, a large one, at all three of them, but it just passed harmlessly over them. I grabbed Osman's hand.

"Don't waste your energy!" I said to him. "I think that wizard made them immune to wind attacks."

I activated my talisman for calling out my beaver. At least while we were behind the barrier he could attack in my place, he didn't use wind, after all.

I saw the wizard jump away from something, probably Katrina doing something, but he remained unhurt. Yasui pressed the attack on the cambion, but he managed to block her double kick. It looked like he was trying to get closer, but her flashy kicks were driving him back, keeping him from striking effectively.

I got my spirit projection activated, and stepped in front of him, figuring with my armor, even if something got through the barrier it would be better if my armor took the blow rather than him. The wizard, making no move to actually get up yet, again flailed his arms and legs around and magic circles appeared underneath our opponents again.

Now what? I thought, as the magic dissipated and our opponents seemed to start blurring themselves.

“Oh come on!” I shouted. “That just isn’t fair!” *He’s using my own techniques against me, now?*

The martial artist recovered from using spirit grades and lunged at the Yasui clone next to him. It was hard to miss that energy level so Yasui turned and tried to fend him off, but there was just no way, he connected and she disappeared.

This is going badly, I thought. *Any time that angel wants to step in, Osman...*

Mr Verocha finished doing something and a gnarled form appeared beside him, inside the barrier. “We could really use your help here!” he said to it. I glanced over, and it was a jiangshi, looking excitedly through the barrier.

“I guess so,” said the demon, looking through the barrier at the three. “You brought me to someplace good!”

“Help yourself, but summon Rahu,” he managed as our two teachers again fired energy blasts out of the barrier. With our opponent’s greater speed they easily dodged.

“I’ll start it, but I’ll need a body!” said the jiangshi.

Hey, I know where there are some bodies! I thought. “Hold them off!” I said, picturing the hallway we came from, next to the now torn off door. I still had some wards Mr DeLefeu had given me, and teleported down there, grabbing the vessel with the busted up arm. *Hope he doesn’t mind,* I thought, shoving the lifeless hunk of metal into a contain ward. *No way I’m lifting this thing to carry it back through, after all.* I threw down the last ward I had to get back to the battle, and stepped through. When I appeared the wizard was finally on his feet, and all three were dodging various energy blasts/arrows from behind the barrier. I tore the ward, spilling the body out at my feet, and shouted it was ready to the demon.

The jiangshi finished the ritual, and the vessel vanished. A large dragon’s head, about the size of a man, appeared overhead. The torches in the room immediately went out, leaving the only light sources the barrier and the two people in spirit grade. Everyone looked up as the head started swishing back and forth, looking over the battlefield.

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“Someone’s brought me someplace nice! I suppose you want me to suck up that energy, right, you little ones behind the barrier there?”

“Yes please!” said the jiangshi. “Just leave some for me, all right?”

“Odd body you found for me, but acceptable, and all that energy would be nice.”

Combat resumed, but it was a little more one sided now, as it appeared that weird dragon’s head could suck up any energy that anyone tried to use. It didn’t matter how much that TMA had, any time he tried to spend some, *vhoop* Rahu sucked it up instead. The jiangshi also started pulling energy from the pair, cackling the whole while. Mr Verochka summoned a few more, and they were all happy to help suck energy out of these three. The two fighters tried to batter down the barrier while we all shot back at them, and we figured the wizard could teleport them out of there somehow if we gave him a chance. We waited until a count of three and all fired at him at once. Even his better dodging couldn’t help him in that case. He had energy bolts coming at him from all directions, so he got pretty messed up. Once he went down the others realized they weren’t going to get away and were hardly able to attack, so they gave up.

Of course by this time most of the staff was there checking out the enormous spirit energy they had felt, so the two were restrained and holy chosen saw to the wizard. He was healed at least enough to keep him stable while they called in other wizards to help deal with him. I wondered what kind of cell could hold people like that, but figured there must be somewhere.

Mr Archer had collapsed after his barrier went down, he said he had put a lot of energy into it, and even spirit mastery didn’t help when he was putting that much out. Other spirit energists started transferring energy back into him.

“It’s all my fault,” whined Osman. “I’m really sorry about all that. I got so wrapped up in thinking we would have to fight them that I didn’t even think about other options.”

“It all worked out,” I assured him. “Don’t worry too much about it.”

“But-”

“Yeah, it gives us all something to shoot for,” said Yasui. “Dean, when we fight next I want you to use your dragon talisman, okay? I need to learn how to fight people with a lot more energy than I have, so you’re elected. I want to be as strong as that guy someday.”

“Are you sure? You’re the one that wanted to leave this school, not that long ago.”

“I didn’t understand what it meant to be a true martial artist, but now I have a little better idea. The world needs people like me to counter people like him, who would use their powers incorrectly. I see that now.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“What will happen to that wizard, assuming he survives?” asked Osman.

“That’s up to the other wizards. Even though they’ve all sold their souls for magic, they aren’t all evil people. They may try to get him out of his contract so he doesn’t have magic anymore, or burn him out some other way. Given who they were working for, I’m sure the demon that provides him power won’t want to be associated with him anyway, so it might not take much.”

“One way or the other though, he becomes demon currency?”

He nodded. “He sold his soul, no getting around that.”

“I guess I won’t pray too hard for his recovery then, though it may be wicked of me to not do so.”

“You’ll have to take that up with Heaven. Anyway, let’s see if we can’t dig the radio transmitter and soul out of this golem here.”

They brought down a seer, who looked inside the golem, and an alchemist who moved it out. As I was the only one around who could immediately pull souls out of things, it was up to me- I hooked into my dragon talisman and put some extra energy into my will, then tried a Soul extracting. I felt it resist, but without a body it couldn’t spend energy to negate my efforts, and I yanked it out of the golem.

“Now what?” I asked. “If I let it go, it’ll probably just go back into the golem again, as that is now the container for this soul.”

“I hate to say this, but you may have to destroy it.”

I looked down at it. “I hate to destroy a soul, no matter how evil. I’m not the All-Father or an Arbiter. Is it really my place to pass judgement on it? Anyway, I can’t harm it any more than I could heal Asteraceae.” I considered. “Though I suppose I could try to forge it, then break it. That would destroy it.”

“Quite frankly, I hate it too, even with what she tried to do to all of us. Tell you what, stay right here.” He quickly walked off and I was left holding this swirling energy. A few minutes passed, and Mr DeLefeu came back holding a feather, and handed it to Mr Verocka. Mr Verocka nodded and performed a quick summoning ritual, and a snakelike figure appeared, wearing a gray robe, with a white cloth over its eyes.

“My work is being disturbed. Please tell me why,” it said quietly.

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Mr DeLefeu gave me a little push forward. “I have a soul here I would like placed into the normal soul cycle, but if I let it go it will just return to the soul container it came from.”

“And is the soul evil?”

“By my definition, yes.”

“Place it upon the scale and it shall be done. Then you will return me to my work.”

I carefully set the soul on his scale, causing him to turn his head, as if his sightless eyes could not be believed. “Oh my,” he said, and vanished a few seconds later.

“I guess that’s done,” said Mr Stilling. “Never summoned one of them before, glad I learned the ritual anyway.”

“I hope it was the right thing to do.”

“You’re worried she’ll still be able to come back somehow?”

I nodded.

“Don’t be. She’s not part of this world anymore, and her connection to this object is gone. She has been well and truly defeated, and it only took two groups of people two years to do it. Let’s see about getting this door repaired and all these things back under lock and key for a while. And I hope they stay that way this time!”

I couldn’t have agreed more.

Finishing Up

And so our journey's ended

“Shouldn’t we tell them that they’re going to lose their powers?” Christina asked a few days later. We were again standing in front of the barrier, ready to seal all the holes caused by Charna’s weird talisman. I had decided to destroy it once the job was done, along with mine and any notes I had made. It was just too dangerous to have that kind of knowledge in any hands, even mine.

“So they can then do what? Bottle some of it?” I asked. “It was borrowed power anyway, and too dangerous. Let it just fade away. Besides, no one but Sadye really mastered any part of it anyway, that we know of. She’ll be the only one who will really miss it. The up side is, no more deaths by nightmares come to life. No more night walkers bothering children. It’ll be over.”

“People will still be able to learn how to better control their own dreams though, using the techniques she and her father pioneered,” said Yasui. “So it’s not all bad.”

“And everyone here has powers of their own they should be focusing on, right?”

She smirked at me. “Is that some kind of insinuation?”

“I’m just asking.”

We spent a solid day there, working with various people who were good at spirit sense to find the holes and patch them, and in the end were pretty confident we had gotten them all. Mr DeLefeu held out his hand for the talisman.

“I was going to destroy it,” I protested.

“The school is actually a hiding place for a lot of dangerous talismans,

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too valuable to destroy,” he explained. “This one can be among them. You can destroy the other one though, I don’t expect we’ll be needing to punch holes in the barrier any time soon.”

“I should hope not,” I said, handing it over. He put it in his own pouch, and said to Osman that he could petition the ophan again to bring us home.

It was now only about a month until school let out for the summer, and we were looking forward to a peaceful time to study for finals and get ready for vacation. The universe, however, had one more little curveball for us, and one last mystery it wanted us to get started on solving.

It was that very night we patched the barrier that Osman, Yasui, Christina and myself woke up to find ourselves on a grassy hill, under a tree of some kind. We looked around, confused, wondering how we got here. That’s when the man in the top hat nimbly leapt from the tree and landed in front of us, bowing.

“Did you know you’re dreaming?” he asked politely. “Or I am. Or we both are. Or neither of us. Or only some of us. I know, I’m coming to that, yes, no, yes, no. Yes, yes, yes of course, that very thing. Hello!”

“Did you bring us here?” I asked, aware now that, yes, I was dreaming. The man in front of us was very thin, and wearing an old fashioned suit, and bunny slippers. His hat had turned into a large frog, which was now sitting on his head and looking at us. I thought maybe it was the frog he was talking to?

“Here? Where? Am I somewhere? Well of course I did. I needed to tell you. Or did you needed to me tell?” The frog jumped down and started to hop away. “Wait for me!” the man shouted, taking off after it.

“What’s going on?” whispered Yasui. “Who is this?”

I just shrugged, and the man, now carrying a plush frog that was half as big as he was, walked back up to us. “Fixed him, I did. Oh, how lovely to see you, I didn’t realize you were here, I have to tell you before I go!”

“Tell us what?” said Christina. “You’re not making much sense.”

“Would you be, if you were first?” asked the man, trying to shove the frog into his coat pocket. “Get in there you stupid- wait!” He threw the frog and it turned into a bird, which perched on his shoulder. “Pity about my hat.”

“The first?”

“Oh yes, I worked it out in the end. Or was it the end that worked out? Well of course the end worked out, you’re here, aren’t you? But is this the end? No, no, no, yes, no, no I don’t think so. No, this is just the middle. Or the beginning, as some might say. But I had to warn you, so here you are.” He seemed to notice the bird for the first time. “Oh hello, where did you come from? What a pretty birdie you are, yes.”

“If you could just focus for a moment...” said Christina, trying not to get angry.

“Say cheese!” said the man, aiming a camera at us.

“Focus. Funny.”

The bird was now a balloon, and he was struggling to keep from rising in the air.

“You said you had to warn us?” Yasui prompted. The balloon popped.

“Yes, dark times ahead. That’s why I brought you here. Chaos. Yes. I’ve seen it. So many things I’ve seen. Chaos. You must beware the vessel. You must become the vessel. The vessel will destroy you. The vessel will destroy the world. The vessel will save the world. You must take it up. It’s the reason I brought you here. The four. Yes, I knew only you, together, could do it. No, the five. How many of you are there? Four? No, no, no, yes it must be five! Oh no!”

“That almost seemed coherent,” said Christina. “What’s this vessel you keep mentioning? You mean those metal things?”

“What metal things? I’m talking about chaos. You know about the vessel? But of course you must, that’s your purpose, it’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“Here in the dream?” Yasui asked.

“No silly goose, here in the world. Had to be careful in my selection. Oh yes, so careful. A wrong choice would ruin everything. The world out of balance, the vessel running wild.”

Christina and Yasui looked at each other. “It was you!” they both shouted.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you. Not long now, I feel it fading, draining away, soon I’ll be no more. So hard to think now, can’t remember, yes, no, yes! Brought you here, through time and space, couldn’t go too far, saw what you all had become, had to have each one of you, here, now, before the darkness grows too deep. The first one was botched, she noticed, whoops a daisy!” He pulled flowers out of his hat, which seemed to have returned again. “Didn’t mean for that. Got better with practice. Can you

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count once as practice? I do. I can count to-" he looked at his fingers. "Ten! Important number, ten. Remember it!"

"You're a dreamer," said Christina. "You brought me here to this time, didn't you?"

"The first, didn't I say? Lost my body, wandered the Earth as dream energy. Saw the future, saw the past. Dark times ahead. The last was the hardest. Couldn't bring him as is, no, had to change him, make him better."

"You're talking about me," I said.

"Yes. No. Yes. No. Toby was his name, Dean is your name. He had a ring, which was good, but he needed to do what you can do. Figure it out. Work it out. Make the right things. Push back the dark, restore the world. Darkness. The ring couldn't do it. Needed to be a maker, a thinker. Had to go further back, remake so many things. Couldn't keep track, but it worked out in the end. In the middle. In the beginning."

The world around us seemed to be getting dimmer, I felt we were either waking up or this strange person's power was failing.

"That doesn't matter. Tell us about the vessel, what's coming?"

"Can't. No, what's done is done."

"The Haughty One."

"The Conflicted."

"The One of Spirit with Body Of Two."

"The Watchmaker."

"The Almost Got Away Fox."

He looked at all of us in turn.

"They are together now, that's all I could do. dreaming is ended, always dreaming since that day, the first day, power struck me, tore my body. Now I can finally rest. Rest without dreaming. Good luck to the five, beware the vessel- it will destroy you, but you must not destroy it. One must become the vessel, restore the balance. Farewell!"

We all woke up.

"Did- did you just-" I asked Osman.

"Did *you* just?" asked Osman.

"We have to see the girls." we said together.

I teleported us into the girl's hallway, and they let us in after we softly knocked on the door. "So what just happened?" asked Christina.

We sat for a few minutes, gathering our thoughts, trying to piece to-

gether what we had heard him say. We talked about it, and seemed to work out the whole story.

“As far as I can gather, the first hole in the shield made a burst of dreamer energy come out. That burst hit whoever that guy was and physically separated him from his body. He then explored time and space, and found out something bad was going to happen. Something worse than the Charma stuff, because he only warned us about this “vessel” of his, now, at the end of his life. So he found five people he thought could learn to deal with it, because of their abilities in the original timeline. I just hope we meet the fifth one soon! He changed reality with his power in the past so they would meet, just like we changed the past with Sadye’s power. Those four are us. He didn’t really know what he was doing the first time, that’s why you noticed it, Christina. Then he did Yasui, who didn’t notice. Maybe he did it while you were asleep?

“Then he found Toby, and saw he could do so many things, but knew that Toby wasn’t the person that would be needed for the task. So he changed Toby’s life into being my life, and here we are. All of that obviously took a toll on him, he seemed rather insane. Now that dream energy is draining away from the world he brought us all into a dream and warned us, and now he’s probably gone. I wonder what else got changed in this world because of what he did? Or which might happen now that the energy of dreaming will no longer support those changes.”

“I feel sorry for him,” said Yasui. “Imagine being ripped from your body into what you think is a dream? How long did it take him to realize his true situation, I wonder. Then taking the task of putting a team together to fight some vessel. All by himself. Any idea what he meant? I just hope he wasn’t talking about one of those robot things, like a super version that no one can handle.”

We all looked around, but shook our heads. No one knew anything about it.

“I think he was just crazy,” said Christina. “How could chaos destroy the world? I mean, what’s chaos anyway?”

“He kept saying it would destroy us and save us at the same time. Maybe it’s how it gets used that makes the difference? Someone uses it wrong, but one of us can use it correctly?”

“I don’t think we can even speculate. I’m going back to bed. Wake me if the world starts ending again.”

We said good night and went back to our own room, and I wrote down everything Osman and I remembered about the dream, as any part of it could mean something. Then we too went back to sleep.

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The next day we talked to Mr DeLefeu about it, and showed him the “dream log,” but he didn’t have any ideas either. I asked Yasui and Christina how they felt, now knowing how they had come to be here.

“I don’t know any other life, so it’s pointless to speculate about what I was before. That me never met any of you, never even really existed from my point of view. I like who I am now, and all of you. I wouldn’t trade it.”

“I’m just glad it wasn’t something evil,” said Christina. “If that mad-man is to be believed.”

“But why weren’t Haniel and that naga affected?” asked Yasui. “They recognized us from before the change.”

“Must be because they weren’t on Earth at the time. It just sort of skipped past them, maybe?”

“It’s as good an explanation as any.”

So we had our final month of school, and finals, and said our good-byes to Albert, who graduated with top grades. He said he wasn’t sure what he wanted to do in the future, but alchemists were in demand so he was sure to find work someplace. He said he would let us know, and invited to come visit him any time.

I again decided to take some summer classes, and put some serious thought into becoming a real alchemist, given how handy those skills were. I had to weigh that against improving other things, as adapting my soul to alchemy would take my entire summer, no doubt. I had some time to decide, it was still a few days until summer classes started.

My friends and I all promised to keep in touch, and share anything that shed light on what the crazy guy had said, and in general things were back to normal.

As normal as one gets, going to *Demongate High*.

Epilogue

Yes, that's it. Come closer.

The stone beckoned to me. Calling. It had taken a year and my life's savings, but finally, amidst the snow and ice, the stone was revealed.

Free me.

It was as black as night, and enclosed in some sort of cage of ice or glass.

Speak the words. Free me.

I had no choice. The stone had called to me, offering me power, the power to change the world. To remake it. It didn't matter if I wanted that power or not. The stone compelled. It didn't sleep, it didn't eat. All it did was cry out endlessly to be moved. To be let free. I had to speak the words.

"Tree. Hat. Toad. Rabbit. Balloon. Bird." Over and over had those words played in my mind. Nonsense. The glass or ice or whatever covering the stone melted away, and it sat in the snow. The words had worked, the stone was free.

Pick me up. Pick me up!

My will was no longer my own. Power no longer mattered to me, only silencing the voice. I reached for the stone.

We became one.

My eyes were like the stone.

"Think I'll go to Florida," I said. "Get some sun. After that?"

"Who knows!"

The ice and snow were once again all that was in that wasteland.

A thousand people won the lottery with the same numbers.

In a single day.

In Florida.

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Note From The Author

While every attempt has been made to follow the official Paragon Demongate High setting rules exactly, the author, (that's me) wishes to note that this work was completed using a pre-production version of said rules and the old HDL version. Thus, certain things may have changed or no longer work in the same way between the novel and the rules. There may also be certain stylistic differences between how the rules are presented and how I interpret them. For this I apologize.

Secondly, many things like talisman powers "require Narrator approval" so I apologize if your Narrator does not allow you to create the same ones I did. Please do not take their appearance here as the ultimate say that you may also create them. This was my story, so I made what I wanted, darn it!

This being said, the characters gained XP, spent energy, and raised their skills as per the normal Paragon base rules, so theoretically anything done here by various characters is possible in campaigns with careful planning.

Good luck in your own Demongate High adventures!

Glossary

A Very Small Bomb: See “The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy”

Accumulation: A spirit energist technique allowing minute quantities of energy to be brought into the body from the environment, further augmenting the natural energy a person can spend.

Air Step: Many different ways exist of standing on air as though it was solid ground. They all share the characteristics of being easy to remain in place, but extremely difficult to remain in the air and move at any reasonable speed. Can save your life if you fall, but forget chasing someone via this technique.

Alcahest: An alchemical substance able to break down any adhesive, acid, alkali or poison.

Artificer: A person who can create objects of power using spirit energy. These objects can be single use only, like wards, semi:permanent like talismans, and chiseled into the very rock of the Earth and lasting until the end of the world.

Ameliorating Medicament: A potion created by alchemy to increase a person’s strength or agility, chosen when created. Lasts a couple of minutes after being consumed.

Analysis: An alchemist must first experience the molecular structure of something before they can use abilities on it. Using this skill, which takes about a minute, can tell them about the substance in question. More experienced Alchemists get more information as they practice this skill.

Aura Reading: See the “color” of the unique energy field surrounding all living things, allowing you to tell their emotional state, general health, and if they mean you harm or not. Any being with powers can learn this skill.

Banishing: A summoning technique that forces a demon back to the Demon World before the normal summoning duration expires. Extremely painful for the demon, causing him hours of agony as his spiritual energies reform where he was summoned from. Obviously, a demon that goes through the process may have revenge on his mind the next time he’s summoned!

Bloodiron: An invulnerable metal, mined in the Demon World. Bleeds instead of rusting, if not taken care of properly, hence the name.

Breath Stealer: Responsible for many tales of Vampires, the breath stealer lives by taking the soul energy of others into themselves. This grants them longevity as long as they continue feeding, but is unpleasant and damaging to the victim. Demons, having no physical form apart from their spiritual essence have this damage magnified.

Cache: A ward that allows the storage of another power, to be activated later.

Channeling: An ESPer technique to contact spirits and gain impressions about an area through residual psychic energy.

Charna: Progenitor who tried to destroy the three major dimensions around Earth with a super cannon she built on the Moon. Killed by several students who graduated the year before Dean enters Demongate High.

Combust: An ESPer skill that can set objects on fire by exciting their molecular structure.

Compulsion: AN ESPer skill to force a person to believe or take some action you suggest.

Concrete Luminescence: An alchemical substance that captures light and solidifies it. In this way a werewolf could carry the light of a full Moon around with him, staying transformed, or a sword made of sunlight could be made to battle vampires. The better a person is with alchemy, the tougher, sharper or more durable the light can be made.

Dean's Egg: When Dean was a baby, a devil cast a spell on him, making him ill and almost killing him. To save him, his parents made a deal with that devil to save his life: namely putting part of his soul into an object so he wouldn't die of the disease. They were unaware the devil could end the spell at any time and make him well again, which is what the demon wanted: leverage over them. In exchange for this "cure," they had to work for him until Dean grew up and performed a service for him, to equal the cost of his soul. This piece of soul was placed into an object that resembled

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a very dark blue egg, and made into a talisman by his mother to hide the fact it was done, and make it nearly impossible to destroy.

Domination: An ESPer skill to physically control the movements of another.

Dreamer: A new power discovered by Dean in book 1. Apparently, after going to sleep and staring a dream, the dreamer may step from that dream into real life and manipulate reality as though they were still dreaming. dream energy attracts or creates creatures of fear that harass and try to kill their dreamers for some unknown reason.

Emotional Influence: An ESPer technique to manipulate the emotions of others. At a basic level, an emotion can be made influenced slightly, for example from happy to very happy. Advanced users of this skill can implant any emotion in a target they want.

Energy, Spirit: What allows people to put effort into doing something, such as lifting something heavy or running long distances. Most supernatural powers also consume at least some energy.

Energy Barrier: A spirit energist technique creating a spherical barrier around the practitioner. Differs from the ESPer barrier by allowing attacks to pass outside.

ESP: An ESPer skill able to gather information about people, places or things that is not physical, but translates into physical things, like knowing someone is in a room with you without seeing them, or someone else's emotional state.

Extend Calling: A petitioner and summoner skill used to reduce the energy drain needed to keep an extra:planer being in our world. Usually energy is drained every few minutes, using this skill before calling the being to our world can increase that time to hours.

Focus Attacks: A true martial artist technique allowing additional attacks. A practitioner must first make a check to determine how many additional attacks will be gained, then can unleash a fury of blows when they next attack.

Focus Defenses: A true martial artist technique, by concentrating on defense, the time it takes to react defensively can be reduced. Skilled users of the technique can use it to react instantly to danger, allowing them to dodge and strike at the same time. Only lasts about 4 seconds after initiating.

Focus Style: A true martial artist technique allowing fighting skills to be improved before a battle, by performing a short kata.

Golem: Created by an alchemist as a companion and protector, usually a human sized creature made of stone or clay. Given “life” by alchemy, it cannot speak but can understand speech, and follows the alchemist’s orders as it’s able. Goes berserk if the alchemist goes to sleep or is knocked unconscious, so it must be restrained during those times with wards or other means.

Grasshopper’s Leap: A true martial artist technique allowing one to jump great distances.

Illusion: An ESPer technique to implant false images, sounds or physical sensations into another person’s brain. Katrina uses them to give others something to talk to, as she has no physical form apart from her brother, Osman.

Incendiary Ether: A liquid that bursts into flames when it comes in contact with air.

Leap: A cambion technique allowing one to jump great distances.

Ley Line: A conduit of energy that circles the Earth. Using the spirit manipulation skill, one can draw energy from these lines to augment their own natural spirit energy.

Masking: An ESPer skill related to illusion that allows a person to be seen, but not noticed. People will look past an ESPer using masking as though they were not there, and ignore speech or actions related to them.

Mental Link: Technically a spell, but created as a talisman would allow several people to talk to one another regardless of distance or plane of origin.

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Meld: An ESPer technique to fuse two minds together. Can be used to look for information inside a person's memory, create a mental battlefield, and even force open a person's mind, making them an ESPer. Usually this results in some form of psychosis, so must be done with care.

Premonition: An ESPer and seer skill to gain sketchy information about the future. You must touch the subject, and only specific events can be asked about. Can also activate involuntarily, though dream imagery, in which case the ability is less restricted due to the conscious mind being shut down.

Progenitor: Early humans that could access any supernatural power available. Mostly destroyed in the flood, but rumors persist that some managed to escape death and still live on, apart from humanity, content to research new abilities and powers.

Projection: An ESPer technique one step up from Bilocation, allowing people to see and hear the ESPer as though they were a ghost. Mastering both these techniques are required to learn Teleportation. Can only be maintained a short time, then the connection between the body and the ESPer's consciousness begins to break down.

Quintessential Unguent: A supernatural oil created by alchemy which makes a substance it coats nearly frictionless.

Sadye: From book 1, the most skillful dreamer in the world. She and her father have been exploring dreamer powers since she was very young.

Sending: An ESPer or seer technique that can put thoughts in the heads of others. The person you are sending to must be known and the difficulty varies by distance.

Shattering Strike: A true martial artist technique to destroy something, like a car or a boulder, in a single attack.

Spirit Cone: A true martial artist technique of creating temporary bodies made of spirit energy to confuse foes. Disappear after being struck. Must be called out to create, as this focuses the power for the technique.

Spirit Grade: The ability of certain people to achieve, through concentration

and will, an excited state giving them a temporary boost of energy. There are 5 grades, each one granting significantly more power than the previous. Higher grades cause damage to physical surroundings and electrical equipment in an expanding radius.

Spirit Hunter: A person that gains power by forcing their soul out of their body, rendering it comatose, and animating a body made of pure spirit energy. They appear with a weapon and traditional dress for their culture, and can call upon greater power by undergoing internal, spiritual journeys with their spirit weapon. Two levels of power are possible through study, transforming the weapon into successfully more powerful forms.

Spirit Manipulation: The ability to use more energy than your normal physical body allows. Using this skill is automatic for the most part, but by concentrating, an even greater amount can be expended for a brief instant.

Spirit Projection: An ability of shamans to project part of their soul outside their bodies to fight on their behalf and protect them. Usually takes the form of a stylized animal, and is unseen and Invulnerable to start. It can learn to use other powers as the shaman grows in experience.

Spirit Sense: A technique anyone with powers can learn to feel out another's power level, ley lines in the area, or hidden foes. Taught as an elective after the freshman year.

Spirit Viewing: A seer technique allowing the flow of spirit energy through a person or place to be noticed visually.

Spirit Well: The name given to those people born with an excess of energy. Up to four times the normal amount has been observed over the years, which does not make greater amounts impossible, but highly unlikely.

Soul Affecting: The soul wielder technique the principal is most worried about, and why he does not let soul wielders be trained at the school. Able to both directly heal and harm a soul, destroying it permanently.

Soul Container: A seemingly glass ball, used in the Demon World to hold the soul of a person, which is exchanged as currency.

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Soul extracting: A soul wielder technique to pull the soul from the body in order to turn it into a weapon or shield for battle.

Spirit Weapon: The weapon used by spirit hunters, which in many cases has a personality and powers apart from the spirit hunter it protects. Can advance through several stages of power, and ranking in spirit hunter Society is primarily based on the strength of your weapon rather than seniority or skill.

The Foundation: the main organization tasked with keeping supernatural things away from humanity at large, and protecting humanity from demonic influence.

Teleport: Move from one place to another without physically crossing the space between. An ESPer can only teleport what they can carry, so people physically stronger can teleport more at once. Very advanced ESPer skill, requires mastery of two other skills to practice it. Some Cambions and true martial artists can learn different ways of accomplishing the same thing.

Transcending: A high level technique to speak to a demon or angel without bringing them to Earth.

Transmogrification: An alchemist skill able to reshape matter into new forms.

Unseen: A supernatural trait that makes people not awakened to the supernatural world totally overlook them as if invisible, inaudible, etc.

Viscid Mucilage: An alchemical adhesive, which works by bonding the molecules of two substances together. Can be counteracted by Alcahest.

Wizard: a person that practices magic, given to them through a deal with a demon. Looked down upon by the Foundation.