

Finding The Balance

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Demongate High

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The Unveiled World

Helping People Club

Finding The Balance

Learning The World

No One to Blame

Paragon Universe

Lonely Divide

Finding The Balance

Robert Ziefel

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination, arose through the Demongate High Paragon campaign played by Robert Ziefel and his friends, or are used fictitiously.

Finding The Balance

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For The Bullied

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

Finding The Balance

1

High School Drama

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had been back to school for three weeks now, and it was exactly the institution of love and tolerance I had expected. In Demongate High, the smallest *Cambion* could have a strength three times normal, and the largest might be a total coward. You learned to look past the physical and respect the powers each person commanded. We didn’t have many bullies because they tended not to live long. Get some first year student riled a little too far and their power, that they had only a tenuous control of, might lash out and destroy you. So people tended to be more civil to each other.

At least apart from the standard holy/Cambion dynamic, of course. Sure, holy people think themselves “better” because they’re basically conduits for Heavenly might, but Cambions think they are in a better position because they don’t have someone contently looking over their

shoulders, complaining they should be praying or whatever.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nor did I bully people myself, I mean honestly there was no point, and I would never lower myself to that level. People were counting on me, I had a reputation to live up to. Both in the Earthly sense and the Heavenly sense, I didn't want Bennu to have any reason to regret letting

me learn some magic. So I stayed quiet, answered when I was called on, and tried to stay out of everyone's way. But I think they saw something in me that most high school kids didn't have.

Experience.

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

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

Ugh, where am I going with this?

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

There's no justice in the world.

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

Inspired, yeah. More like... stupid.

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

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

Lynsey, I think?

"You should do something about it."

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

"You could take him."

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

"I like your tattoo," she blurted.

Tattoo? Oh!

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

"Does it mean anything?"

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

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

"The what?"

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

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

Now why in the world did I say that?

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

"Oh, what would you get?"

We headed out the door, walking side by side.

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

"You're a pegasister?"

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

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

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

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

“Serious!”

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

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

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

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

“Dean?”

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

“Oh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yup.”

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

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

Okay, maybe things aren’t all bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

accident, when under stress. This is the exact opposite of “keeping a low profile.” Something bad would happen, and they would be totally unable to explain why. Then mundane law enforcement would get involved, and reporters would pick up the story- I guess living on the island did serve a purpose after all.

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

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

The fun one was a necklace I bought in the shape of a four leaf clover. One of the Artificer teachers, Miss El-hashem, had created a talisman earring that increased her luck. She had been all too happy to provide me the notes on how she had created it, given the fact I was so good at making talismans. She noted if I went through with it I would probably become the luckiest person that ever lived. Given what we were facing, I figured I would need it. I made it permanent, no activation or energy required- you just slipped it on and became super lucky. It was working, when I wore it I found all kinds of loose change between my house and the school, (I walked there) even a 1909 S VDB penny. It was in mint

shape, someone must have just dropped it on the sidewalk and not bothered to pick it back up again. I sold it on ebay for a thousand dollars.

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

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

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

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

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

They were going through the "C" books, for "chaos" but those

mostly detailed Primoris, which was “above” Heaven, and the beings you might encounter within. As that region was nothing *but* chaos, the books were revised on an almost constant basis. And as no knowledge was ever lost, (the shelves didn’t need to obey regular physical laws, after all) the stacks just got higher.

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

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

“Bonjour, class!”

“Bonjor!”

SO POINTLESS!

2

Lucky Charms

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

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

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

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

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

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

in the future, where they would have fallen off a ladder and broken their back instead, we could call that good luck.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had to risk it.

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

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

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

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

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

Which led to me thinking again about the wisdom of keeping pow-

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you okay?" asked my father.

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

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

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

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

We Teleported.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was stunned. “What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“But they’re so dangerous!”

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

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

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

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

There were nods around the table.

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

“It’s just an example. Your group solved the cracks problem before, and closed off Dreamer power. You messed with time, stealing a

homunculus. Then this Club you formed, getting people into your debt? I have to say it worries us a little.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I shrugged. “If it helps my friends stay alive, I’m going to do everything I can for them. I’m sorry that worries you, but it’s the truth. And

to be blunt, this seems a little bit more serious than just career planning. I came to you with something I thought would help- a place to get information from. You turned around and started acting like I was on trial.”

They shifted uncomfortably. “It just goes back to what we said at the beginning,” said a man. “You were willing to use your powers in broad daylight in front of who knows how many witnesses. If you’re willing to flout the rules now, maybe you don’t care for them at all. Or will continue to flout them until we have to do something about it.”

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

“No, we can’t ask that,” said Martin.

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

“And what would you do, to retake the island?”

“I thought you would never ask.”

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