

Lonely Divide

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Lonely Divide

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Lonely Divide

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.

Lonely Divide

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For Carolyn

*Many people influenced my life.
Even though we walked different paths
you were one.
Thank you for being who you were,
at the time I needed you*

Lonely Divide

Chapter 1.1

Introduction

You find yourself in the home of the Narrator

You are standing in a room displaying a curious fusion of the child-like and the mature upon all sides. Books of every description overflow from shelves, some of which are glowing- the books, not the shelves. Who would make glowing shelves? I suppose if you got up that many times in the night to find a book it could be handy, but a light spell would be easier. Or just, I don't know, turning on a light? The switch is conveniently placed on the wall, right there. These books actually glow for effect, because I wanted them to, not because someone has actually taken the trouble to *imbue* a light spell into the... *ahem*

Books. On shelves. Continue. Also to be seen on various, also non-glowing shelves, are dolls. Neatly preserved in their original packaging, while figurines, plush toys and ancient video game machines crowd around them. Many of the figurines are scantily clad, but all seem to share a common large eyed heritage you could probably place if you thought more about it. All seem to have at one time been precisely placed, but now their display seems more haphazard. Almost as if a small familiar, like a cat, had at one time disturbed their positioning. The owner was either pleased with the slightly more chaotic feel of the layout or was just too lazy to straighten them out again... this cannot be determined simply by looking.

A large picture window to your left lets in sunlight through cream colored vertical blinds, and a yucky colored house with a black car can be seen outside, across the road. Despite the sun, the trees burst forth with not a single leaf, leading you to believe the season is early spring, which of course would be entirely correct. A calendar hangs from the computer desk, and shows it is sometime in March, proving in your mind just how good at the whole seasons guessing game you are. Turning around you can't help noticing the ungodly stack of ancient computers that sit in a heap behind you. Back and to the right are yet more shelves full of, as far as you can tell, junk. It probably has sentimental value? As you continue to glance around, a gray cat charges up to you and begins demanding something with a curiously squeaky cry. Looking down at it you can't help noticing how much the carpet needs to be vacuumed. *Obviously the*

home of a bachelor, you think to yourself, also noticing the wires trailing everywhere and the rack of swords on the wall. Yeah.

Hearing his cat crying the man in the room, how did you not notice him before, turns from the curious machine he is standing in front of. Obviously a computer, but with a screen that lays flat on the desk, and currently projects upward an image of what looks like a map. The man regards you seriously, as though waiting for you to explain yourself. He seems reluctant to speak. He seems average looking enough, with wavy brown hair, blue eyes, perhaps slightly taller than average, and thin. Finally the silence (such as it is, the cat still hasn't given up meowing at you and rubbing your legs) stretches too thin even for him. He speaks.

"Well, come right in, don't bother knocking or ringing the doorbell or swirling your cape dramatically and having a minion announce you." He pauses, then finally smiles. "I'm kidding with you, of course. I've been expecting you, and I didn't write you doing any of those things, so why would you? Also if you were not expected my barrier shields would have been fully active and done something either terribly hideous or humorously ironic to you as you entered, depending on my mood."

You begin to wonder about this person's sanity, he didn't "write you" doing those things?

"Yes, yes, you're in my power, you know. There's no getting around it apart from ceasing to read, and it's only the introduction, you wouldn't pick up something to read and then not give it a fair chance before putting it down again, would you? By that I mean you aren't *that kind* of person, are you? No, no, I thought not. I started directing your actions the instant you read the first word, which I graciously allowed to be about you, rather than me. Go back and look. I'll wait, go on."

You recall that he is correct, the very first word you remember reading was "You" and the sentence was about what you were doing, but is this strange person expecting gratitude? Then you can't help thinking... sentence? Are you reading about doing these things or doing them?

"Oh, it's much the same to me," says the curious man. "And no, I'm not expecting anything, I'm just pointing it out. Now come, I'm just putting on the finishing touches. Oh you needn't worry about spoilers, it's all very high level at this point. Not even I know the ultimate direction yet- Take a look!"

He gestures you over to the map, and you can see he's been working on the framework for an entire world, which he seems rather proud of. "Let me introduce you," he says, and dramatically centers his hands

over the model, then draws them apart. The room seems to fall away, and you are drawn into the framework. You find yourself standing next to him on a plain looking city street. The people walking seem to take no notice of either of you, in fact, they pass right through the man as though he were not even there. You step around any person coming at you, just to be safe. It is the cautious thing to do, even if evidence suggests you are currently intangible, or somehow not part of the current scene.

“This is just a set piece, of course. Wait, is that the right phrase?”

The man looks off to the side and makes a curious motion with his hands. Perhaps he is casting a spell of some kind?

“No, it’s the opposite of a set piece, according to Wikipedia, it’s more like a storyboard. Facade? It’s something, who cares? The name of the thing isn’t important, in this case. Usually I would say the opposite was true, wouldn’t you? But then I am a wizard, of sorts. This bit won’t be seen again, it’s just to set the scene. Like an opening shot in a movie, where the camera pans down and everything? You know what I mean.”

You do.

“Of course you do. Take a look around!”

As you do, you notice a blend of both the fantastical and the technological, both in the architecture of your surroundings and the people. In view you can see people with robot arms and legs, people who are obviously magical, regular people, and some fantastic creatures like fairies fluttering about. The buildings are both familiar city style dwellings and fantastic in nature, floating or otherwise showing the occupants are students of the mystical arts. In the distance you see a large shape in the sky and wonder if it’s a plane. As it comes closer you see it’s a dragon, but no one seems concerned as it passes overhead.

“His name is Vexixarax, I’ve just made it up right this second when I wrote him in. I have no idea if his inclusion here foreshadows any event in this story or not. Well I do, of course I do. But that’s the me in the future that knows, not this me, standing here now. You appreciate the distinction, I gather?”

Again, you do.

“Again, of course. So, by now you’ve realized the story is not set in either the world of tomorrow or the fantasy world of yesterday or of true magic or even your world of the everyday. Rather the combination of these things, just because I can. This is the world of Paragon™, yes I said Paragon™. How do you pronounce “™?” Well I don’t know!”

You hadn’t asked.

“You were going to. Anyway, I’ve created this world for the story you’re about to read, so I thought you would like to know what you were getting into. This world is a crazy place, full of people who have given up their bodies to become mechanical, wizards of great knowledge and power, and some fantastical creatures. Such as those I’ve just now recently described to you without saying a word. Speaking of that, everyone speaks the same language here, because honestly, get a worldwide language going already, people! At least one creature you might meet will seem to be from your mundane world, but which will have a hidden depth you wouldn’t have expected. Remember I said that, you’ll know him when you see him.”

You think to yourself that you’ll certainly try.

“Good.”

The man closes his hands up again, and the world shrinks to reveal the cluttered room.

“It’s actually a rare opportunity, you know, you arriving as you did. I haven’t put the forth wall in place for any of the major characters, so I’ll let them introduce themselves. Oh, one important thing to always remember- these people *know*.”

The man placed a finger aside his nose, as though telling a great secret and wanting you to recognize it as such. The gesture is totally lost on you, you have no idea what he’s getting at.

“I mean they know they’re part of a story, a “role playing game” type story from the Paragon™ book, and they are the main characters. They have character sheets and everything, you’ll see. It’s a very taboo thing to ask to see someone’s character sheet, of course, but that’s in the world. You’re not part of it, so go ahead and ask them. They won’t mind showing you. Now most people in stories don’t know they’re in a story, right? Also, typically, they don’t know exactly how good they are at certain things, or how much effort they need to expend to improve themselves. The people of this world do know those things. They have inventories, they have a *combat delay*, it’s totally without remark these things are true. For them, the natural state of the world is to be able to pull out a *character sheet* at any time to consult it, or add something to their *inventory*, or what have you. So don’t be surprised if they express amazement when you ask them about it.”

You wonder if you’re going to ask them about it.

“It’s not an interactive media, so I have to sort of guess at what questions you would ask, and then have you ask them on your behalf.

Like just then when I mentioned inventories and things, and you wondered what that all entailed. There is a glossary somewhere around here, you can look up terms in italic print there. I'll get it to you before long, in fact you may already have it. Look around, it's someplace. Anyway, you are under my power, as I said before, which is a big responsibility for me. I'm not a prankster, don't worry. I won't comically harass you in any way. I could," he said, holding up a finger, "but I won't. Keep in mind, once chapter 2 starts the forth wall will be up, so you won't be able to interact with them at all, so don't try. It'll just confuse the issue."

You nod appropriately.

"Excellent. If you don't get it, I appreciate your not letting me catch on, it's very mature of you. Live in ignorance, I guess that's the world's motto? I can't really tell, it's very confusing out there. Anyway, let's meet our *ESPer* character, he can tell you more about himself and the world. I won't say he's the main character, so take no notice of the order in which I introduce these characters, it's basically at random. I think?"

You wonder what an *ESPer* is, but the Narrator (as you've come to think of him) gives you no chance to ponder this question. He again expands the map and you find yourself standing without him. You are looking instead at a young man who is currently making what appears to be his laptop float in the air.

Chapter 1.2

Introduction

You are with Jake, in his room

You are slightly behind a young man in a very messy room. He has blond hair, and is slightly shorter than average. He seems to be concentrating quite intently on the object he's levitating, and doesn't notice you are there. However, the people in the city you just left did not react to your presence either, so you are unsure if he should or not. The room is quite cluttered, with posters of mostly naked models papering the walls. The bed is unmade, and clothes are heaped about the floor. On the top of all the crap on the desk you see a very official looking envelope and a letter with a government seal on it. You lean over to take a look. Again, the boy takes no notice of you, but sighs and continues spinning his laptop in midair, moving his hands around as he does so. Odd.

The letter reads:

Dear Jake Beachamp,

Congratulations on your upcoming graduation from high school. As you know, it is compulsory to register your PC/NPC status no later than one week after graduation. Provided is a list of centers you may visit. No appointment is necessary, walk in any time during business hours. The determination will consist of a confidential examination of your character sheet by a licensed CSR (Character Sheet Reviewer) and should take no more than ten minutes. Should you be found to be a PC, don't despair! You will be paired with other members of the PC community and given missions suited to your temperament and skill set. Death is very much unlikely, despite what you may have heard! If, on the other hand, you are found to be an NPC, you may continue your average life, with your average skills, and nothing interesting will ever happen to you. Unless, of course, you interact with PCs as part of their ongoing plots. If you wish to join NPC-PS as an NPC yourself, we have a number of positions always available, from clerical work to backup for PC teams. We would welcome your involvement!

Should you decide to forgo this examination, rest assured that wizards will hunt you down no matter where on Earth you try to run to, and bring you back. You or your family will bear the cost of such services, so I would advise against it.

Your term of service will be five years, after which you are free to pursue your own interests and whatever further adventures the Narrator might have in store for you. You will be discharged, totally assured you have done your part for the greater good of the community. You may also stay on with NPC-PS if that is your wish. All this can be discussed at the proper time, PC or NPC, a future with NPC-PS is a bright one!

We look forward to seeing you soon!

NPC Protective Services

What a strange letter, you think to yourself. Was it really written by a government official? Probably not, you decide, but rather that Narrator character you spoke to earlier. Oh, it seems Jake has tired of spinning his laptop in mid-air, and carefully floats it to his bed, turning around.

“Yeeaaaa!” he shouts, finally realizing you’re in the room with him. He swiftly looks around and points to his lacrosse stick, then at you, and it flings itself at you almost gleefully. Oh yes, with wild abandon it takes to the air, soaring up, up like a majestic bird, or a surface to surface missile of some kind. Oh sad for it that it harmlessly smacks off of you, and goes thumping dejectedly towards the floor.

“Oh, I’m really sorry!” says Jake, “you totally surprised me there, which I actually get a lot because of my oblivious weakness. Did I hurt you? If I did I can use *Healing Acceleration* and fix you right up.”

You indicate to him that you are unhurt.

“Oh, thank the Narrator. I had a vague feeling you were coming, and that I should answer any of your questions, not that I should fling stuff at you. You must be impervious or something, I flung that pretty hard. Which I’m sorry about, really.”

He does seem sorry, and offers his hand for you to shake, which you do.

“I’m Jake, nice to meet you.”

You introduce yourself to him.

“So you’re the Observer, huh? I guess it’s to be expected, once you become registered as a PC, you get an Observer, and I guess you’re it, huh?”

You wonder what all this PC/NPC stuff is about.

“Well, you must have that where you come from, right? I mean, some people go on to do great things, right, while others just sort of... live?”

You wonder if such a distinction can be said to be so black and white.

“Oh sure, it’s easy to tell, look.” Jake reaches behind you to get his letter. “The determination only takes a couple of minutes, I mean just looking at someone’s character sheet, you can tell.”

You wonder about this “character sheet” business and exactly how one could tell to look at one.

“Where exactly are you from? No, don’t answer that, I don’t think I’m supposed to know. Look, I’ll just...” Jake seems to hesitate. “I’ve never really shown it to anyone before, you know? I guess I better get

used to it.”

You have a slight panic attack at exactly what he’s talking about, but he doesn’t seem to be reaching for any zippers as he whips it out. He hands you a piece of paper, and you wonder where he pulled it from. You look it over.

“See, I have three stats that are above normal, ENDurance, RESolve and INSight. Because I’m an ESPer, of course, so the Narrator adjusted those because they’re the most important to my powers.”

Powers? Character Sheets? What?

“Okay, I guess you don’t know about any of that. I have powers because I’m an ESPer. See,” he points to the sheet where it says BACKGROUND and listed is:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (ESPer)	3	Honorable	1
Energy Siphon	1	No Direction Sense	1
ESPer	4	Oblivious	1
Talent (TK)	1	Somatic Powers	1
Thoughtful	1	Youthful	1

“An ESPer is a person with psychic powers, you know, floating things, telling the future, leaving the body, all that kind of stuff.”

You realize “ESPer” is just sort a of shorthand term, made up to sound cool.

“I guess.” Jake laughs. “I think it stands for Extra Sensory Person? That doesn’t set me apart as a PC though, there can be NPC ESPers just like there can be NPC wizards.”

You wonder, then, what does?

“All NPCs have stats of five, that’s the easiest way to tell. Their skills are all fives as well. They’re just average in every way. We PCs are above average in some way, that’s why we get sent out on missions for the government.”

You think that sounds a bit dangerous.

“We always work with a team, there’s always a couple of PCs discovered at the same time, that’s how the government knows there’s about to be some kind of crisis. And we’re PCs, the Narrator allows us to try harder to stay alive than he tries to bump us off. Oh, there’s some danger of course, but without us there’s no story, so if we get killed, he’s out of

a job too.”

You think he would then make everything go the character’s way, and that wouldn’t be much of a story either.

“No, he has to obey the rules just like we do. He *rolls the dice* to see if we can do something, and manages our *energy* to help us succeed at things. If we run out of energy, or there’s a lucky roll by an NPC, we could still be hurt.”

You hand back the character sheet, and Jake puts it away, but somehow you don’t exactly catch what he does with it to do so.

“So like the letter says, tomorrow I go and tell the government I’m a PC, and they assign me a team and missions. Does that help clear things up?”

You suppose it does.

There’s a knock on the door, and a slightly shorter boy with a mechanical leg peaks in. “Mom says to come down to dinner. Oh hi!”

You start to respond, but he’s gone again.

“That’s my little brother. He needed a cybernetic leg for some reason a couple of years ago, but I can’t remember why. We both woke up in the hospital, and I was an ESPer and he needed a new leg. He doesn’t seem to mind, but he won’t tell me what happened either. My dad said he was given the choice of having a wizard repair the leg with magic or getting the cyber limb installed. He said the cyber limb was cooler, so he chose that. I guess it is a little cool. Well, I’ve got to go, I hope I helped a little! Oh, and I’ll forget I talked to you once the story starts, so if I think about things we talked about, just ignore it. Bye!”

He seemed like a nice young man, you think to yourself. But now how do you-

Chapter 1.3

Introduction

You are standing next to Jaden, workout equipment is all around you

“I’ll be right with you!” she says, landing another flurry of blows to the workout bag she’s currently pummeling.

You look over this girl and decide she’s probably Chinese, and pretty cute, too, if you’re into that sort of thing. “That sort of thing” being a young, cute, asian girl currently beating the snot out of her workout bag at high speed. Sweat is streaming off her face, and her uniform is a bit damp as well. You seem to be in a finished basement, stuffed with martial arts gear and training tools. Jaden gives a final shout and ends her workout, breathing heavily, and turns to greet you.

“Oh, you must be the Observer! I can’t believe the Narrator sent you to see me when I looked like this!”

You can totally believe it, based on what you saw of his living room/workshop/whatever that room was.

“I’m Jaden Shan, I’d shake hands but I’m all sweaty. Do you mind if I just ran and took a quick shower? I have to find Rose anyway, you’ll want to meet her. It’ll just take me a second, don’t go anywhere.”

You think it’s impossible for you to do so.

Jaden runs off up the stairs, so you take a closer look around your surroundings.

Minutes pass.

Then a few more.

You begin to feel forgotten: That is because you have been.

You head up the stairs and see that Jaden seems to live in a pretty nice house, her parents have some money, that’s for sure. You call out into the house, wondering where everyone is, but get no reply. You listen for the sound of running water, or something to indicate where she’s gone, but don’t hear anything. You move to the front door and look out, perhaps she went to get the mail or something and had to talk to someone? This seems farfetched of course but-

“Excuse me, who are you?” a voice asks from somewhere near the ground.

You look around, but don’t see anyone.

“No, under here, he’s scared of you and won’t come out.”

You wonder if you’re hearing voices now, and bend down, tilting your head to look under a nearby bush. To your surprise you see a fairy riding a rabbit, or more technically sitting on a rabbit, as the rabbit is currently not moving. The fairy is only a couple of inches tall, and female. She has short, golden hair and iridescent wings like a dragonfly. She’s not wearing anything that you can tell, but most of her is hidden by the head of the rabbit she’s sitting on, so it’s tough to say. She seems to be holding a rod with a tiny jewel at the tip, and it’s pointed at you. You wonder if such sights are commonplace around this household.

“No, he doesn’t let me ride too often, but it’s fun when he does. Now can you answer my question?”

You think for a moment, and recall she asked who you were. You tell her.

“Oh, that’s different then! She just ran off and left you down there? Honestly, that girl would forget her head if it wasn’t attached. One too many blows to the old noggin if you ask me. Come on, I’ll help you find her.” The fairy turns her attention to the rabbit, and talks to him in some way, then flutters her wings and darts towards you.

“I usually wear clothes when expecting visitors, you understand. It was just such a nice day out I couldn’t resist. Also I had only the vaguest sense the Narrator was going to send you, given we’ll be registering soon. Probably intentional, it would figure our Narrator was one of the oddball ones. Most things are, you know. Intentional, not oddball. Sorry if it bothers you, or anything. My being naked, not things being intentional. I guess I’m not making much sense at the moment. Let’s start over. I’m Rose Petal, nice to meet you.”

Suddenly, the fairy is person sized, and shakes your hand before shrinking back down again, and putting her wand back into her inventory.

Wait, you think, where did she just put that?

“She’s probably in her room, come on.” She zips through the door and you close it behind her.

Rose leads you up another flight of stairs, and yes, her parents make a pretty good living at something, you can tell by looking around.

“Just a second, I’ll go see if she’s in there. I don’t mind you see-

ing me like this, but she probably would. *Humans*. Mind you seeing *her* like this, if she's just getting out of the shower, I mean. Not seeing me, you've already- 'k bye." Rose takes her wand out of her inventory again, and wiggles it around while chanting. A glowing circle appears at her feet, and magical energy shimmers around her. The circle disappears, and Rose nods, satisfied. She puts her wand away again and passes through the door as if it wasn't even there.

You can't help thinking how extraordinary this world is.

Chapter 1.4

Introduction

You are now in Jaden's room, with Rose

“I’m sooooo sorry I forgot you!” pleads Jaden. She’s now fresh from the shower and wearing a robe, and Rose is sitting on her shoulder rolling her eyes. “I knew I had to do something afterwards, but I totally forgot what it was!”

You wonder how this is possible.

“She’s not stupid, if that’s what you’re thinking,” says Rose. “She just has forgetful, that’s all.”

You’re getting better at this, you know this must be something on the WEAKNESS side of her character sheet.

“That’s it exactly. Here, take a look.” Jaden hands you a sheet of paper, and again you miss exactly where it comes from. Rose also hands you hers, which is physically impossible, the paper is bigger than she is.

“What does that have to do with it?” she asks, confused.

You look at both. It seems Jaden has the FRIENDS background, probably why Rose here is hanging around rather than doing her own thing. Uh oh, Rose has HUNTED which can’t be good. You see at least one similarity with Jake, it appears Jaden also has Aptitude. Her list reads as follows:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (combat)	3	Forgetful	1
High Pain Tolerance	1	Honorable	1
Prodigy (Martial Arts)	2	Insecure	2
Resources: Money	1	Obsessed	1
Talent (Martial Arts)	1		
Tough as Nails	2		

Comparing that to Rose's list:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (magic)	3	Curiosity	1
Bilingual	1	Deep Sleeper	1
Fairy	3	Easily Infatuated	1
Natural Magician	4	Magical Focus	1
Permanent Spell	1	Naive	1
		Short Attention Span	1
		Won't Kill	1

Wait, there's that "Aptitude" again...

"Oh sure," says Jaden brightly. "It's pretty expensive, but it can pay off in the long run if you figure you're going to raise a large number of skills that are all related. Look on the back, see Rose has thirteen magical skills. Seven planets and six skills like Magical Theory. Aptitude raised them all by one, and lets you have an eleven skill rating when you've mastered the skill rather than ten. Just raising three skills to nine saves you thirty points over time. Heck, just as it is, Rose has saved," she starts counting up skills, "*seventy-eight points* just by having that one background! Nicely done, Rose!"

Rose blushes. "I didn't really have anything to do with it."

You deduce that this "skill rating," from zero to ten represents how good you are at doing something, with a zero meaning you have no training, and a ten meaning you have totally mastered the skill.

"That's right! Now take a look at mine."

You also deduce that, no, Jaden isn't stupid, is she? She explained that very well, and it's a pretty complex line of thought, given how tired she looks right now. You flip Jaden's sheet over and take a look. In the RTG column next to Martial Arts is an 8, but apparently when she actually attacks someone she treats the rating as though it was a *twelve!* A girl this young mastering martial arts to that level? Did she take every bonus she could to that particular skill?

"I think I did, actually," she says modestly. "I'm just getting started. My Paragon background lets me raise the skill without limit, and at half the cost it would usually take! Of course as Martial Arts costs double normaly, it's just brought back in line with other skills. That's okay. I can only be at an 8 rating right now because I'm just starting out. Once I

register and start doing missions, I can raise it higher than that.”

You can't help being impressed. Rose looks like she's losing interest, so you decide to bring her back into the conversation with a question about her background: Natural Magician.

“That relates to how I do magic. See, there's two kinds of magic users, Scholars of Magic that cast spells through study, and Natural Magicians who cast with energy. Turn it over again.”

You do.

“See, it lists my energy right here as 49. As every spell I cast uses at least one energy, I can only cast 56 spells in succession before I pass out. (My ENDurance is a 7, as you can see) I could do a few more than that if I paced myself because energy comes back over time, but that's about my daily limit. The advantage of my way of doing it is, if I really need something to work I can spend extra energy and give the magic a little boost. A Scholar can't do that!”

You look at the back again and notice she seems to have written down certain planets under the Skills column. How can a “planet” be a “skill” you wonder.

“Magic falls under the domain of a celestial body,” says Rose, angry that she can no longer say “planets” because stupid Pluto isn't considered a planet anymore. “Stupid scientists and their stupid not naming things planets which are planets.” (You can tell she totally knows better than scientists what a planet is.) “Like Mercury is spells relating to movement and Neptune relates to water. It's really all just a ploy to keep me from becoming too powerful as a spell caster, making me learn different skills for doing the same thing, casting spells.”

You wonder exactly what magic is in this world.

“Some believe it's just asking the Narrator to change the laws of physics in your vicinity and on your behalf. But come on, praying to a supreme being to intercede in reality for you alone, just because you asked nicely? Nobody's going to buy that.”

You are somehow made slightly uncomfortable by the way this conversation is proceeding.

“No matter how it works,” she continues, “you ask the forces of magic to do something and if you roll more than the difficulty, it happens. Then when the conditions for that asking have been met, the magic goes away. Of course you still have to maintain it, which is a pain. Still, I wouldn't give it up.”

It's magic, of course you wouldn't.

“There are exceptions, of course, like my permanent spell of Detect Enemies. That lets me concentrate and see if there’s anyone around who would want to hurt me. You can’t be too careful when you’re my size, you know.”

You start to hand the character sheets back, but then something that’s been bothering you makes you take another look. It’s as you thought, Jaden has “Forgetful” and Rose has “Short Attention Span.” That should make for an interesting friendship.

“We try to help each other out,” says Rose. “I help her remember things, and she helps me focus more on what I’m doing. It’s been that way since we’ve been together, which is a long time. She was just the cutest little kid!”

“Oh stop!” Jaden is blushing.

You ask how long that is, exactly.

“She was only a couple of years old when I met her, and I was probably about two at the time. Of course we fairies mature a lot faster, because we get killed easier. As a PC I got the ability to cast magic, so that’s helped me out a lot, we watch each others backs. And other things.”

They both are blushing now, and looking away from each other. Odd.

You tell them both it was nice to meet them, and you’re looking forward to seeing what they can really do in the story.

“It was nice to meet you too. I’m sorry again I left you down there. I hope I don’t disappoint you too much in the coming adventure!”

You wonder why she would do that, she seems quite capable.

“It’s her Insecure weakness,” says Rose. “She never believes she can do anything right. It’s kind of annoying, but I put up with it.”

You put your hand on her shoulder and tell her you’re sure she’ll come through all the challenges the Narrator creates with no problems.

“I’ll do my best!” she says, putting her fists up and pulling them down.

You smile, she sure will.

Chapter 1.5

Introductions

You are standing with Clayton at a shooting range.

You are standing behind a rather tall boy with black hair and dark skin. He has two guns in his hands, and looking around you see you're at a shooting range. You realize your left hand is still raised, and is now on the shoulder of this boy, who seems to have just been shooting targets. His left hand crosses his body and you look down the barrel of the pistol he's holding.

"Can I help you?" the boy asks.

You jerk your hand away, and mutter an apology and a curse to the Narrator who seems to delight in putting you in awkward positions. You somehow get the impression he's giggling.

"Narrator?" says the boy, turning around. "Oh, you must be the Observer."

You hastily explain that is in fact the case.

"Just a second."

He turns back and finishes firing the bullets out of both pistols, then pulls the empty clips out and safely takes apart the weapons. He hits a button and the target at the end of the range starts sliding forward. Because the Narrator is too lazy to roll every shot you see they are pretty much on target for the sake of his convenience. You look the boy over. His arms and head have been modified or replaced, they are gleaming metal instead of flesh and bone. You can also tell, as the boy turns around again, that his eyes have also been replaced with mechanical versions.

"Nice to meet you," lies the boy, giving your hand a perfunctory shake. "I suppose you'll want to see my character sheet, then."

Somehow this is not a question, but he doesn't wait for you to answer. He hands it to you and starts cleaning up his spent casings. You look it over, and the first thing that catches your eye is the amount of points in Cybernetics this kid has. Well, the first thing you notice is his name, Clayton Garlington, as he didn't tell it to you himself. Then you see his list that makes him the special flower he is.

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Ambidexterity	1	Bad Tempered	1
Cybernetics	6	Obsessed (Shooting)	1
In the Cards	2	Overconfident	1
Resources: Money	2	Prejudice (gang members)	1
		Stat Penalty	2

You wonder aloud what the “in the cards” background does for him, and without turning around he answers simply.

“When the party gets cards, I get one more.”

You wait for a more lengthy explanation, but none comes. You wonder aloud why cards are involved.

“Don’t you know anything? Each PC gets a number of cards to help keep them alive through each adventure. Like “Missed Me” and “Made you Look.” They’re like a sort of spell, I guess, that cause things to go a certain way it might not otherwise have gone. I get one more than everyone else.”

You decide to just keep it in mind, it’ll probably come up soon and you can see a practical example. You continue looking at the character sheet. Lots of hacking, internet related or mental augmentations have been done to this kid. As well as his arms, greater armor, and a “weapon link.” You’re pretty sure that gives him some kind of bonus to shooting stuff, given how good he is at it. His Resources: Money of two is pretty nice, you understand it gives him \$10,000 of spending money every month, making him loaded.

“Not so much,” he explains. “For every point of cybernetics I have to spend \$100 a month maintaining them. I have 6 background points worth, that means 60 cybernetic points. 60x\$100 is \$6,000. So I only have \$4,000 per month left. I suppose the agency will pick up that tab while I work for them. Unless I want to work for them forever, it’s better to have my own money, you know?”

You do. A monthly fee equal to the cost of a decent used car, every month? And you thought the cost of gas was high! Cybernetics are a real money hole! You turn the sheet over, he doesn’t have too many skills, actually. He’s specialized all right, hacking and combat seem to be his focus. He grabs the sheet away from you and puts it away somewhere.

“Happy?”

You consider his demeanor, and decide to answer in the affirmative. His expression softens.

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually *this* bad tempered. It’s just I have to register tomorrow and I’m sure to get stuck with a bunch of half-wits. It’s the only way I’ll get *XP* and raise my skills, so I’ve gotta do it.”

You think perhaps the government might have something to say about it, if he didn’t. Especially judging from that letter you read back in Jake’s place. Clayton doesn’t seem worried.

“Unless they sent other PCs after me, I wouldn’t be too concerned. You’re right though, I have to do my duty, being a PC myself. It’s just such a drag, you know?”

You don’t.

“Oh, right. Say, have you met the other PCs I’m going to be grouped with?”

You say you have visited several others, why would the Narrator send you to people not related to the story? So yes, it must be them, but didn’t someone say the memory of this meeting was going to be erased anyway?

“Yeah, I suppose it would have to be. Guess I’ll find out myself then. Anything they didn’t answer?”

You think back to what he said a second ago, about *XP* and raising skills. Doesn’t practice increase someone’s skill at something? Like he was doing just a minute ago?

“Nah, that won’t raise my skill, you crazy? That was just me shooting at stuff, which I enjoy. I have to change the number on my character sheet with *XP* to get a better roll when I use a skill. I suppose that represents practice, but I really don’t have to do anything to make it work. Say I have an eight in my pistol skill, which I do. I need nine *XP* to raise that to a nine, so when I shoot someone I add a nine rather than an eight. You following me?”

You wish, if it wasn’t too much trouble, if he could show you an example?

“Sure,” he answers brightly. “You can’t be hurt, can you? I mean you’re not of this world, right?”

You seem to believe that’s the case, though with this Narrator you can’t be sure of anything.

“Okay, hold your hand out, yeah, like that. Now I’m going to make a called shot to your hand, right? Now usually it’s a minus two penalty to hit an arm, but I want to hit the hand specifically, so it’s a minus three.

Watch.”

He throws a punch at your outstretched hand, and you somehow realize he “rolled” a nineteen. This is one from his maximum “roll,” and then with the minus three penalty he wound up with a sixteen to hit you. As you aren’t dodging, and the difficulty to hit something that’s just standing there like a lump is a five, he easily hits you with his metal fist. You are unhurt.

“See,” he says. “Now with a nine rating, that would have been an even twenty, winding up to be a seventeen.”

You nod your head, understanding. If you had tried to dodge, you would have “rolled” your “active dodge” and if your number was greater than his, he would have missed. You wonder what your “active dodge” would actually be...

“Hope that cleared that up for you.”

It did.

Clayton finishes carefully packing his guns away. “Guess I’ll see you- or no, I guess I won’t will I? You’ll only be able to watch through the forth wall. Hope the Narrator doesn’t make me do something stupid!”

You hope that as well, and this time shake his hand more properly.

Chapter 1.6

Introduction

You are again with the Narrator

“There you have it,” he says to you, pleased at how much longer that took than he expected. He knows it just means he’ll have to come up with less plot for later, and he threatens to giggle again. He gets himself under control. “I hope you learned some things about the world, and that my characters work out for you.” He fiddles with the map. “There, the forth walls are in place and our story can begin!”

“Enjoy!”

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hardcover.

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