

First Contact

When: A day (or maybe two or three it's hard to say) later

Where: Portal Room

"So what can we expect once we get there?" Susan asked, when the group got together to make their final preparations for the mission to rescue her father. Naturally Silverstreak was there, along with Sparkle, Jenny, Ami, Merida, and Luna who was standing apart from the others. She looked a bit sad, knowing that Susan was about to go into danger and while her *cat* could go with her, she could not follow.

"It's tough to say," Silverstreak answered. "I haven't poked around his 'prison world' very much because that would attract attention."

"Oh."

"Cheer up. Your adventures in finding Luna gave you the time to gain the skills you'll need for this. Frankly if you had found her in the first place you went to, I still would have recommend you liberating some other worlds to gain experience. And I'm not talking about the XP kind, either. That was important, but only your travels could really guide you to what skills you needed. Plus, you have help." He swept a hand to indicate the others that were standing there.

"You must have some ideas, however," Ami postulated.

"I do, Ami. The place was inhabited, of course, so there may be some natives still hanging around the place. Downside- are they friendly? Probably not."

"Probably the meanest of the bunch, kept alive to guard the prison," Merida figured.

"That's not a stretch. Why bring in outside help, which costs energy, when there could be perfectly good troops already there? They would even have their own weapons, and know the territory. Because you gotta know the territory. Good news there is, the people that were first there didn't have any active powers, so conventional weapon fire is all you'll have to worry about."

Oh, is that all? Shotguns, explosives, and acid, oh my.

"Plus I'm getting you as close as I can to any signs of life left there so it's more likely you'll be facing enemies than finding friends in that area. If there are even any friendlies left at this point, which I doubt."

"Why would The Darkness pick just people with guns to guard his most secure place?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah, when it plucked me out of the Disney world I had all kinds of troublemakers to deal with!"

"Energy efficiency," he answered simply. "If you don't have to supply them power to fly or do energy blasts, so much the better. Guns will kill just as easily, and much more simply."

Right, it didn't know which would make me desperate enough to agree to "the deal." So it choose a whole bunch and figured the cost was worth it, if it could get a little closer to owning my soul.

That was the idea!

"And this time I'll be without my magic items that make me harder to kill," Susan grumbled. She had left her *materia* and other parts of her "inventory" behind just in case they didn't make it back. "Better that some other wanderer makes use of it," she had said.

"You've got a nineteen passive dodge! Not as good as when you have all your items, but come on!"

"I mean make me harder to kill," she indicated her friends, "so I could be the shield in front of everybody. I dodge and people behind me get hit. That's no good!"

"Oh, I didn't let you finish. I get it. But we talked about that before, it's why I gave you the Poké-balls. Anyone that does have powers probably isn't a native, and you can snap them up to bring back here. Anyway, the second thing we probably know about the place is it's freezing. With most of the energy already siphoned away, a day at the beach is not in the cards for you girls."

"Ah, that's why you said sensible pants and shirts and not bathing suits," Jenny said with a laugh. "Too bad, I'd have loved to work on my tan at the same time we were rescuing

her dad.”

“That actually helps us!” Ami thought aloud.

“What, we could wear armor more easily over thick clothes?”

“No, not that. I mean if the place really is that cold any heat sources, like from say a prison? They would really stand out. Guards too. I can scan for them with my computer!”

“Nice one, Ami!” Susan told her. *With her and Sparkle’s ability to sense life, we shouldn’t be caught by surprise by anything. Wait, that’s probably why she got picked to come along despite not having real combat skills outside her world. Her computer must have different sensors than just my watch?*

“You’ll want to stay with your pistols, of course?”

“What?” She mentally came back to the conversation. “Naturally. These things are great, and Jenny, remind me to show you the gun/brain targeting link I got installed in my left one.”

“That’s fine. I’ll load you up with explosives, first aid stuff, rations, anything I can think of. You’ll still have access to your *sub-space pocket* because that’s not a power, it’s a consequence of you traversing realities. I ask because I wanted know if you wanted spare batteries. Yes, I hope you won’t have to fire 300 times but better safe than sorry.” Susan nodded. He gestured, and a ton of boxes neatly arranged themselves out of nothing, and the girls swarmed over them to start packing them away. They were labeled in all different languages, so it didn’t matter who looked at the package, they would know what was in it. Some had winter coats in them, which the girls pulled on. Naturally Susan was already in her armor which was insulation enough, and while the garments they were pulling on didn’t look all that thick, they were fantastically heat reflective so it didn’t take much to keep the person inside them warm. Silverstreak did help fit her with some sleeves, and she pulled on a pair of snowsuit like bottoms over her pants. She also took some explosives, food, and the spare batteries for her pistols.

“Cat food,” Sparkle reminded him, looking over the boxes.

“Yes, I’ve got cat food right here.” He nudged a box with his foot, and Sparkle tucked it away in her *pocket*. “As far as you getting there, basically you’re going one at a time. You’re going to run at the portal, which I’ll activate just as you get near it. You’ll pop through and the portal will close. Then a few minutes later the next one can go through. The less time the gateway is active, the less chance Darkvoid will detect it.”

So it’s better to open it a bunch of times for a short time than just once for a longer time? Interesting.

“And thanks to this,” Susan indicated her upgraded watch, “my part can’t tell other parts we’ve arrived.”

“Exactly. Don’t lose it!”

“I won’t. I didn’t lose the original one, did I?”

The story didn’t require you to, it wouldn’t have been that big a deal, Sparkle thought. I had one, and people here knew to check on us, like when you vanished in the middle of that battle with the sphere robot and someone came to get me.

“Just saying. I think that’s about everything. You’ll be in for quite a fight once you’re through, I hope you’re ready.”

“As I’ll ever be, I think.”

The last of the supplies disappeared, and everyone got out whatever weapons they were going with. Merida, of course, held her *soulbow*. Jenny had a rifle out, Ami just her computer. She was Sailor Mercury, though in winter gear now instead of her normal short skirt, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to use any powers once there. The computer and visor was all she would get. Everyone looked to see if anyone else had any questions, but no one did.

“Okay. Susan, I expect you’ll want to go first?”

“That’s right.” Sparkle jumped up on her shoulders.

“Then run.” He pointed to the space where the portal would open, and Susan nodded.

“See you girls on the other side.”

“Good luck,” Luna told her, having said goodbye “properly” before they had come down to this room.

“Nah, I’m back to my standard LUCK, I’m counting on Sparkle to make any LUCK checks for the group.”

“You know what I mean!”

“Yeah. Look, with all this time stuff we should be right back. With my father. If not...”

“I know. Train up and come rescue you!”

“No! Get home and live whatever life you would have had if I hadn’t been born into your reality. If this place takes this group out, nothing’s coming back from there. Nothing not their own self, anyway.” She shuddered, thinking about her black eyes. She did *not* want to be fighting Luna if she got taken over and she came to “rescue” her.

“You better.”

“You’re the seer! You should tell me!”

She gave a small smile. “Reply hazy, try again.”

“We’ll be back,” Susan promised, putting a hand to her cheek. “I promise.”

“I know.”

Susan turned and nodded to Silverstreak. “Ready. You’re going to activate it just as I reach the wall, right?”

“I’m not Inari. I wouldn’t let you smack into it the first time for comedic effect.”

“Just checking. Here we go!” She ran for the wall, and vanished into light.

The cold that hit her wasn’t too bad, but crunching through the thick snow had slowed her down once past the portal.

Plus the system that powers my energy barrier, allowing me to strike at a higher TR, continues to drain my speed to keep itself charged. With my reduced STRength I feel it more. Didn’t think about that one.

She sprinted to some cover, which turned out to be a rusted out car, and crouched nearby. Sparkle was looking all around, having made a maximum roll *lifestreaming* check to sense for nearby lifeforms.

“Fairly sure there’s nothing within ten meters,” she reported, having made a fifteen LUCK check for this to be so.

“Got it.” Susan looked around, and this place was indeed shot up and coming apart. It looked like it had been a fairly modern city at one time, with normal looking cars now rotting away on the torn up streets. Everything was covered with a thick layer of snow, and there was no wind to speak of. The snow made it hard to say just how badly the buildings were decaying because of being covered up. But this looked like a city street much like any other. The sun overhead was weak and hardly provided any light at all, despite there not being any clouds in the sky. It seemed more like moonlight than sunlight, and Susan felt a pang for a world lost and drained.

“There’s an open door just there,” Sparkle said, pointing with a paw. “We could get out of the street and watch for the others arriving.”

“Good point. Keep your senses sharp, the only early warning we have now is you.”

“I’ll keep my nose peeled.”

“I don’t think that phrase works...” She cautiously as she could crunched through the snow and crossed the street to the open door, which she crouched in front of.

“Clear.”

She backed through it, guns out, and while it wasn’t any warmer, at least the snow wasn’t too deep here. At least in the center of the room.

“We’ll have to do something about those tracks,” Sparkle grumped. “Anything comes along here, they’re going to see a bunch of tracks that appear out of nowhere and then come in here.”

“But hopefully we’ll be solid gone from here shortly.”

“If they raise an alarm while we’re still sneaking around though... Radio signals travel faster than us.”

“Good point. Look, there’s Merida. She’s seen the tracks, come on hurry up.”

One by one the others arrived and stood around. They discussed the tracks they had

made, now four separate paths that started out of nowhere and came here, but what could they do?

“Let’s just move on from here as quickly as possible,” Jenny suggested.

“If we can find some stairs, maybe we can get higher and I can scan the area for heat,” Ami suggested. “We don’t want to go further away from our goal.”

“Good plan. I’d carry you, but I only have a 3 STRength at the moment. We’ll have to find some stairs and walk up. Sorry.”

“That you aren’t all powerful at the moment? You should be.”

The girls smiled but knew now wasn’t the time. They crept through the building and found some stairs going up, which while somewhat badly damaged held up and got them higher.

“Should have gone to a taller building,” Ami said once they reached as far as they could go. “I see one just there.”

“Do what you can,” Susan told her. “We can head there if you don’t get anything in this one.”

“Right.” She activated her visor and looked out the window, seeing if there were any heat signatures nearby. “Oh no! Three heat signatures nearby and coming this way!”

“Oh great. Take note of the direction and stay here. Jenny and Merida, let’s get ready to welcome our guests.” *A regular patrol or did The Darkness see the door we used? If they radioed back to base they were checking something out, and then don’t check in again, we’ll be in a lot of trouble.*

The three (plus cat in one corner under some rotting furniture) found cover and crouched, waiting for the three heat signatures to get closer. They were covering the one door, figuring as soon as they saw movement they would just unload everything they had. After first figuring out if they were friends, of course.

If they were friends they had a funny way of showing it, as something spiky and heavy at the end of a chain sailed through the door ahead of those outside.

Oh crap “Grenade!” shouted Susan, as if that wasn’t obvious. But that was the thing to yell in this situation, and Susan wasn’t going to let the opportunity pass her by.

Instead of exploding, however, it released a thick cloud of black smoke, and Susan heard heavy, booted feet charging into the room.

These guys don’t know who they’re dealing with.

She took a deep breath, held it, closed her eyes, and with all the *overconfidence* she could muster charged into the center of the room.

As combat began, Merida was actually up first, but the thick smoke obscured her vision and she was pretty sure she had seen Susan *somewhat recklessly* charge headlong into combat. She didn’t want to hit her friend, so she simply drew back an arrow and waited for a target.

Goon 3 and 2 now went, and simply shot at the thing they saw moving through the smoke. What they didn’t know is that without putting energy into COOrdination, they physically could not hit her (except with a maximum roll) because of her extremely high *passive dodge*. But she could hit them. She was up next and pointed her guns where she thought they might be and pulled triggers four times each. She got a twelve and thirteen, ironically the thirteen being her off hand. That beat their passive dodge of 10 apiece, but not their armor, as Susan was trying to take them down with non-lethal force. She rolled minimum on her perception check, which including her -2 for her poor hearing made that a four. She didn’t hear the distinctive pinging her guns made as the energy packets bounced off.

However, Ami had heard, and as she didn’t really have any skill with guns and was rather useless in this situation, she yelled out “They’re wearing armor!” Not so much because she knew Susan hadn’t heard, but because she believed Susan hadn’t *seen*. Through the smoke. But she heard that.

Goon 1 fired blind in the direction that noise had come from on semi-auto mode which started tearing through the desk she was hiding behind. She got a nineteen on her REASON check to know that screaming about it wasn’t going to help, but only an eight on her RESolve

check *not* to actually scream.

She screamed.

Susan heard that too. *Shoot, Ami I told you to sit this one out... in another room. You followed us down here?*

Jenny was up, and her guns were always lethal. But she too didn't want to hurt her friend who had *very stupidly* thrown herself into the middle of the cloud. Probably to show off. But two people could play the grenade game, dipping into her *pocket* for one of the dozens of varieties she had picked up over the years. (Most from the same place her guns were from, of course). She thumbed it active as a "free action" as she pulled it out.

Sparkle was up, and while she had seen Susan run into the smoke *as she had fully expected* she could feel her friend's life force as well as the life force of the others in the room. So she had no problem targeting the nearest goon, Goon 2. It was a near miss, twelve to twelve (for the flanking bonus) so she spent one of her 3 remaining XP for a +2. This was a hit, and she got him in the left leg for 5. *Oh, big deal.*

Susan was now up again, and adjusted the TR setting on both her guns with four clicks on the dial fitted into the grip. Goon 3 and Ami went, Ami quieting down and Goon 3 firing off another burst as Susan who was already pivoting to avoid the attack she calculated was coming. He only managed a nine after the penalty for the smoke, and Goon 2 followed close behind with another shower of hot lead. He was even worse off, and now Sparkle was up again.

She, Jenny, and Goon 1 now went at the same time so Jenny tossed her grenade out which floated over to the nearest form and stuck fast.

"Huh?" managed the goon who had felt it stick.

Sparkle meanwhile was shooting at goon 2 again, but was apparently ready this time with a twenty one dodge, while she only managed a twelve. Goon 1 was still firing at Ami, and stepped out of the cloud to get a better shot. This allowed Merida to come back into play who shot him through the armor and impaled his soul to the wall opposite her.

"Poké-ball him, now!" she shouted.

Ami, who was also holding, peaked about the room and saw the glowing arrow impaling the guy. He didn't actually look human, but she didn't stop to admire his ascetics. She made a throwing motion, combining getting out and throwing a Poké-ball in one motion. (What, did you think they were just sitting around all that time Susan and Luna were getting reacquainted?)

She got a twelve to hit him, and as he wasn't going anywhere got zapped into the ball. Given his twelve damage to the soul which put him very close to being unconscious anyway we'll say he didn't manage the RESolve check to break out.

Susan was now up again, and again fired blindly at where she expected her opponents to be. Eight shots total flew out as she managed a fourteen on both checks. Both goon's armor took all the damage, leaving Goon 3 half his *damage capacity* left, while Goon 2 was only down by about a sixth. But at least the armor was taking damage now, instead of just ignoring it.

Goon 3 now went, yanking the grenade off his side and getting ready to throw it back. Sadly, having stuck onto something .2 seconds later it went off, blowing off his hand and throwing him back through the wall. This also tore him up pretty bad, and his name was removed from the roster of active combatants. This left only Goon 2 who was now fully visible, the grenade's shockwave having cleared the room of smoke.

That's how you do a grenade, Jenny thought smugly.

"Only one left and the smoke is gone!" yelled Ami, further contributing to the battle. Susan opened her eyes and sighted with her left hand, taking the bonus from her cybernetics rather than just "calculating" where her opponent was going to be. This gave her a nineteen to hit, more than enough to pierce the armor and do sixteen damage to his body. He was one from gone, and dropped.

“What were you thinking?” Jenny shouted. “Charging into the middle of the field like that?”

“...Getting the drop on them? Doing what they least expected and shooting them up, pow pow?”

Jenny was gasping like a fish, unable to articulate her frustration with that statement.

“Not that I want to excuse the behavior,” Sparkle put in, “but consider that Susan is used to working with just me. She’s going to have an... adjustment period, let’s say, to working with the three of you.”

“Better make it quick,” Merida advised. “You’re the leader of this little rescue mission, don’t forget.”

“To be fair, I knew what I was doing. I haven’t been studying *gun fu* for a year to pass up the perfect opportunity to use it.”

Jenny found her voice again. “Just be more careful. You’re not untouchable anymore, and we don’t have any magical healing, remember. You get shot, and you stay shot, and I seem to recall something about *low pain tolerance?*”

“Shoot, you’re right. I suppose they could have gotten a lucky shot off. But don’t just yell at me, what was Ami doing down here? I told you to stay put up there!”

“I want to help,” she replied a little sullenly. “I’m part of the team too.”

“Don’t change the subject-”

“Never mind all that,” Merida chided them. “What were those things we just shot up?”

The girls looked over at the fallen figure, now bleeding and an inch from dying. The other was rather blown up and thus hard to make out what it used to look like, but the bleeding one was intact. Intact and... not human.

Jenny was the first to speak. “You’re right, what is that?”

From Fight Manga to First Person Shooter

When: A moment of horrified staring later

Where: Building near where the girls showed up

“Shouldn’t we do something about his bleeding to death?” Ami asked. “Or are we just standing here waiting for him to die.”

That’s right, she’s the one who wants to be a doctor, right? “Go ahead and stabilize him,” she said to Sparkle, who nodded and put a paw on what looked like his nastiest wound. There was a soft green glow and the bleeding slowed.

“Oh, we do have supernatural healing,” Jenny realized.

“See, I do know what I’m doing.”

“I guess.”

“It’s actually technological, at least it was at first,” Sparkle explained. “You could probably get it when we go back and you have some time to train.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. As for him, let’s put him in a Poké-ball, that should put him into a suspended state and Silverstreak can deal with him,” Jenny decided, getting out one.

“How do you know it’s a male?” asked Merida, looking the body over.

“Ugh, don’t even joke about that.”

“Really though, how do you know?”

“I don’t.” The girls looked the figure over. It was fairly massive, covered in thick armor in bad need of repair, (having been shot a bunch of times by Susan, and not being that new to begin with from the looks of it) and had skin like that of a reptile. No hair, but pale flesh and a mottled green texture covered the heavy frame of the creature. The eyes were sunken far back in the skull, protected by large ridges of bone. The nose was squat and cut off, and the mouth didn’t seem to have lips like a human. The yellow, crooked, crowded teeth were fully visible, rather than covered with plump, kissable lips. *How do they keep things from falling out of their mouths when they chew? Their mothers could never tell them to close their mouth while they ate.*

“If that’s a human, it’s been significantly altered,” Ami told them, as if that wasn’t obvious.

“I suppose in different circumstances, we might have been the best of friends,” Jenny remarked, bopping the being with the capture ball. It was sucked in and she put it away.

“We at least have a better idea what we’re up against,” Merida said, trying to find the bright side. “What’s with these weapons though?” She held up one of their guns.

“Is that a chainsaw on the end of that rifle?” Ami asked, looking it over.

“I think so. Why is there a chainsaw on the front of a gun?” Susan asked.

“Why not put one on?” Jenny countered. “I just wonder what kind of fuel it uses. Ah well, it’s going in the collection.” She picked up the guns and stuck them in her *pocket*.

“We better get going,” Sparkle told them. “When those guys fail to report in, the place will be put on alert.”

“And I think the old ‘disguise ourselves in their armor trick’ isn’t going to get us very far,” Ami reasoned, looking the other one over.

“True. Ami, scan down the street in the direction those guys came from, let’s see if they were coming from somewhere or heading back somewhere and we should go that way instead.”

“Right.” She did, and reported there were much stronger heat signatures in the direction they had come from.

“Then that’s the way we’re headed.”

The group silently, or as silently as one can when crunching through deep snow, made their way in the direction of the heat source. But at least one thing was working in their favor—the snow left an unmistakable trail back the way the now defeated beings had come from. Susan was in the lead, followed by Ami who was scanning back and forth with her visor. As the group crouched at the mouth of a narrow alley into a plaza, Ami spoke up again softly.

“The heat signature is here, but coming from the ground.”

"There's less snow on the ground here," commented Jenny.

"But that could be because it's tramped down more," counted Merida. "There are a lot of tracks."

"Meaning we're going to have to check every building in case it's the one that leads down to the lower level." Susan looked about, not happy about the situation.

"Split up?" asked Jenny.

Susan peered out of the alleyway. This almost seemed like a wharf area, she could see off to the left what might have been a dock before everything froze over. The alley emptied both left and right, so technically she and Ami could go one way, Jenny and Merida the other. She and Sparkle could protect Ami, and she was fairly certain the other two could handle themselves well enough for the sound of combat to alert them.

"I don't think we should," cautioned Ami. "If we had thought to bring some kind of communicators, maybe."

"We couldn't risk it," Jenny told her. "Any stray signal around here, no matter how well disguised, would probably stick out."

"Oh, that actually makes sense. Wait a minute, let me scan for radio signals..." She pressed buttons on her computer but finally shook her head. "Nothing. It would have stuck out all right."

"We would search twice as fast!" protested Susan.

"But if we found something, how would we tell the other team? Plus it's twice as likely we'll get spotted."

"If we did," thought Merida, "at least the other team could take whoever was fighting that team from behind."

"No, let's stay together," Susan decided. "I think the first rule is never split the party, right?"

"Sounds about right," Sparkle agreed. "Which way, my feet are freezing."

"Away from the docks, we'll go right. Clear in that direction?"

Both Ami and Sparkle agreed it was, so everyone readied their weapons again.

The group crept out of the alley, sticking to the right side building as much as they could, then crept up to the door. Ami scanned it, nodding that there were no threats inside. Still, Susan stayed on one side of the door while Jenny opened it from the other side. She gave the door a push and Susan sprang through, guns out.

"I don't think you'll need to do that every time," Merida told her, walking with her bow lowered. "Ami said there were no heat sources in here."

"So why not robots? Or cold blooded creatures that like the cold and would show up as the ambient temperature? Or just plain old tripwires and traps?"

"Yeah, there could be anything around here," Jenny chided her. "Just because it isn't warm, doesn't mean it's not a threat. Heck, could Sparkle pick up zombies?"

"I... don't know," she admitted, jumping up out of the snow onto a box that was inside. "Never had occasion to try."

"Looks like a small store," Ami remarked, looking around. "At least until it was smashed up."

And so it was. There were tipped over shelves, packages had been torn apart, but there seemed to be no access to anything lower than a basement that the girls could find. Once satisfied they crouched by the door, did what sensing they could, and continued to the right.

The next building was much larger, and had a wooden gate in front of it that had been cleared of snow. Ami and Sparkle said the building was clear and they tried the same thing at the door, but the handle just rattled in Jenny's hand.

"Locked."

"I don't suppose you've picked up *lock picking* in your travels?"

"I could give that chainsaw attachment a go."

"Perhaps something that won't alert everyone in a fifteen block radius?"

"True, it could be kind of loud."

"I could take the lock out with *lifestreaming*," Sparkle told them. "But my energy isn't

limitless.”

“What did Silverstreak give us? Anything that could help?” Susan asked the others.

“Wait, I think I saw something,” Ami broke in, pulling one of the smaller boxes out of her *pocket*. “Some kind of laser cutter, I think. That’s what it says here.” She fired it up and sliced the lock mechanism out of the door, and the girls silently swung it open. This seemed to be a clothing store, but it had been converted. The shelves here were stacked with all sorts of firearms, explosives, and ammunition. Most seemingly tossed without regard for esthetics or care. Jenny was looking them over, while the others searched for any way down to the lower levels from here.

“Wouldn’t the entrance to the prison more carefully guarded?” Sparkle asked. “I mean one lock... We should just look for the place a bunch of guards are in front of.”

“But that would scream ‘here’s the entrance to the place’ to anyone that wandered in. No, better to leave tracks all over the place and make us search all the buildings... oh gee that’s what we’re doing.”

“I guess. It is costing us time, and increasing the chances we get spotted.”

“You could take a picture, it would last longer,” Susan joked to Jenny. She had been turning the gun this way and that in her hands.

“Very funny. I’m taking this and that, and that, and... one of everything. The thing is, these weapons were not meant to be used by those guys we saw out there.”

“Oh?”

“No way. Look.” She held the gun up, it was some kind of pistol. “The trigger here is meant for human sized hands. But if I recall properly from that guy we balled, his hands were much too large.”

“So there were humans here. You think those guys are aliens?”

“Unless two very distinct species evolved here.”

“Nothing lower down,” Ami reported, coming back with Merida. “Just more of the same. Weapons strewn about for some reason.”

“Jenny thought they were for human use, not the species we fought a moment ago.”

“Seems about right. Maybe these belonged to whatever resistance fought The Darkness here?”

“So why bring them here?” Merida asked.

“Have to put them someplace?” she replied with a shrug.

“Fastidiously neat yet hideously ugly agents of The Darkness? I don’t know...”

“Just because they look ugly to us, doesn’t mean they aren’t the prime members of their species.”

“A face only a mother could love.”

“Help me gather up one of each of these,” Jenny interrupted. “Then we can get out of here.”

“Right.”

Once again pausing by the door and making sure the coast was clear the girls proceeded. They now needed to pass by an open space between the building across the way diagonally from where they had come out and the next house to the right. Susan was of course in the lead, so it was her *passive dodge* the sniper atop the bell tower some distance away had to beat in order to headshot her. He was aiming and managed a thirteen. (This was after the penalty for the headshot.) Any normal person probably would have been killed outright, but thanks to her *gun fu* being fueled by *ninjutsu*, she felt something was wrong and jerked back at the last second.

“Sniper!” Jenny shouted, figuring if Susan could point out the obvious, so could she. The girls dived for cover as another shot rang out, this time targeting Jenny. That time, ironically, he got an eighteen and shot her in the body for seven damage. She cried out and fell, dropping her gun and pressing her hands to the wound.

“Where’s it coming from?” Susan demanded, and the others were peering from cover trying to see just that. Sparkle did something a bit more useful, she jumped in front of Jenny and put a barrier around them both. A bullet just barely missed penetrating it, and there was a green flash where the impact splashed off.

"My computer registers a lifeform on the tower over there!" Ami informed them all. Susan looked over there, wondering just how good a shot she was. (She actually knew, but still.) The tower was 10 meters away at least, and several in the air. Susan had no scope on her pistol, it was made for more close quarters combat, but she did have a computer in her head that was making her a far better shot than she ever could have been on her own. She pointed her pistol in that direction and waited.

She saw movement in the distance, the sniper no doubt, and she pulled the trigger, doing a called shot to whatever she was seeing over there. With eight energy into MANipulation she got a thirty six to hit, and took a minus two for the distance and a minus three for the headshot. That's still a thirty one, and may I remind you that difficulty thirty is supposed to be doing the near impossible. So that's what she did. His head took twelve damage, the maximum the gun could do at that TR, right in the mouth. This exactly took his health to zero, and he slumped over.

The others gaped at her.

"Nice shot," Jenny praised her. "I don't know if I could have done that."

"It's all in the wrist. Get under cover and get her healed, Sparkle."

"You get her under cover, I don't have hands."

"That's what I meant." Susan walked over as the barrier dropped, and half dragged, half carried Jenny behind the crates she had taken refuge behind. Sparkle started healing her.

"I think things are going to warm up here in a second!" Ami cautioned. "I'm getting a bunch of heat signatures from over there!"

"Naturally he called for help *before* he started shooting," Merida spat disgustedly. *I could have made that shot...*

It took three tries and seven energy but Jenny got up and grabbed her gun. "Thanks," she said to Sparkle, scratching behind her ears. "You're pretty handy to have around."

"Glad I could help. You want a barrier up here when the fighting starts?"

"I don't know," Susan hemmed, looking about. "We couldn't have picked a better spot, could we? There's all this chest high cover to crouch behind in this walkway here."

"It is rather odd, isn't it?"

"But there's some over there too," Merida told them, looking down the street in both directions. "So they'll have some too."

"That's what they make big guns for," Jenny told her, getting some large rocket launcher looking gun out and setting it nearby.

"Just hope they don't have the same idea," Ami worried. "Don't suppose it's too late to ask for a weapon of some kind I can use? We are going to get sort of pinned down here, and I'd rather not be defenseless."

Jenny thought for a second, then reached into her *pocket* and pulled out a funny looking pistol. She tossed it to Ami who looked it over. "It's the easiest to use weapon I have," she explained. "Hold the trigger down and that'll charge it up. Aim roughly in the direction of your target and release the trigger. The plasma bolt should have enough attraction to whatever you're shooting at that precise aim isn't needed."

"How does that work?"

"Couldn't tell you. Not even the weird, turtle like aliens I got them from could tell me."

"Weird."

"Here's some grenades too, they're homing as well. Just pull the pin and toss them." She tossed some over.

"Thanks." There was a beeping from her computer. "Here they come."

Gun and grenade wielding soldiers, much like the ones they had already shot up, came pouring out of the street from both directions. To make a long story short, we'll assume our heroines come out on top. All but Ami had a bit of a contest to see how many they could headshot, Susan having reduced the TR on her guns to three for increased damage. She wasn't interested in getting through their armor, just keeping her friends safe. Merida's minimum headshot roll was an eleven, Jenny's a ten (her gun had minor targeting AI and stabilization built into it), and of course Susan with her ridiculous fourteen meant all of them were far better attackers than their random NPC style opponents. Ami popped up when her

gun was charged, zapping anyone she could with plasma, helping when she could. She also tossed a few grenades for good measure.

When that wave was defeated Susan told everyone to move up. "We'll head for that bell tower. What do you want to bet with that sniper on the roof it leads down to the lower level?"

"Straight through that way or around to the right more?" asked Jenny.

"Going the faster way appeals, but I don't want to be fighting off a three way attack. That open area seems like it would be a bad place to be in. We'll stick to the houses on the right and hopefully keep it at two, maximum."

"Got it." She put her rifle over the box they were hiding behind and looked through the scope up at the bell tower. "Seems clear. Ami, Merida, come over here. We'll move up in pairs like this."

"Right."

So the group moved up, and directly ahead was a larger open area that ended in a pile of rubble that would have prevented them from moving any further that way. *Probably to keep people sneaking around the other side of the bell tower. This way there's only one access point, the way we're going.*

Another wave attacked them, but this time they sprinted into the more open area and hid behind an overturned car, forcing the creatures trying to kill them to attack from only one direction instead of two. Once again our group of valiant ladies slaughtered all comers. They now needed to follow the path to the right, then down a narrow passage and around the corner the steps to the bell tower would be in sight. They cautiously crept forward, past the now dead and dying beings that were not getting any prettier.

"Wait," cautioned Ami. "I'm reading a new heat signature."

"Another wave?" asked Merida.

"If it is, it's a small one. It's just one person I think."

"Maybe someone a little tougher has come out to play," Jenny reasoned. "Where's the reading?"

"That big open space we didn't want to go into because we'd be totally exposed."

"Naturally. Maybe we can snipe him from a distance. Let's go."

Getting up to the corner and peering around, Susan saw a figure standing in the center of the open area, but someone quite different than the goons they had been gunning down. This one looked human, and somehow familiar. She couldn't see them very clearly, and she certainly didn't have a good shot even with her bonuses. He knew where they were, and was clearly staying out of sight simply by nature of the clutter that littered the square.

"It's just a guy. I don't even think he has any weapons."

"Then he's extra dangerous," Ami decided. "They know we're here, and we've been beaten two waves. The Darkness must have sent someone it thought could take you."

"Gonna be a redhead convention," Jenny remarked, looking through her scope.

"Red hair? Who do I know that has red hair?"

"Let's get closer and see."

"Check that tower first," Ami cautioned.

"Good call." She peered up there. "Clear."

"Why don't you stay here and cover us? I don't want to be dodging fire from there while trying to fight this guy. You like longer range combat anyway."

"I do. Good luck."

The three (plus cat) moved cautiously forward again, rounding the corner but still staying low and trying to remain hidden.

"Come on, I know you're there," the figure suddenly shouted. "This isn't like you, Susan. Sneaking around? Come on, where's that fire you had the last time we met?"

Susan didn't let him goad her, simply dashed to the next corner and looked around it. The man was there, and he indeed did have red hair. He was wearing heavier clothes than last time she had seen him, but there was no mistaking who this was.

“Glad you could make it,” Sangray told her. “Hope you brought that delicious looking Merida along, I’d love to see her again.”

Sangray vs the ladies, round 1, FIGHT

When: A moment after finding Sangray standing there

Where: On the outskirts of the market, Old Town

"I know you," Merida said to Sangray, poking her head out next to Susan's. "You were there with Elsa and escaped right before The Darkness switched bodies."

"That's right. How lucky for me to be ordered to fight you, once again."

"Not lucky for you," Susan told him. "We know how your powers work."

"We do?" asked Ami.

"He can use the powers of those around him," Sparkle explained.

"But we don't have any powers at the moment," she protested.

"Of course you do!" Sangray shouted. "You just can't use them at the moment. It's like having a car, but you're currently on a bike trail. It doesn't mean you don't have the car, you just can't ride in it."

"It's just you though? I would have expected The Darkness to pull another Meggie and have dozens of fighters here to meet us."

"I know, right?" he agreed. "I tried to tell it that, but would it listen? Noooo. You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think it doesn't think like that. It's sort of a loner so it doesn't think in terms of big groups. Plus, it sees us as ants. What's the difference between one and three for example?"

"What, ants? Not much I guess, if you're a boot."

"Exactly. And you're sort of a loner yourself, I don't think it counted on you bringing friends. Thanks though, I'm sure their powers will come in handy too."

"But if it had sent fifty people at us there would have been no way to win!"

Sangray shook his head. "I almost think it wants you to win through here. I don't know, it's been in a fairly good mood ever since you cut the part of itself inside you off. Plus, the regular troops around here haven't been so much as slowing you down. How many people like us, with above average abilities, do you think exist even across realities? Not many in the scheme of things."

"If you think it wants us to win, let us go on."

"No can do. You still have to earn it because that's my orders. And don't think it'll be easy, I've not been idle since our last meeting either."

"Does all that have something to do with it?" Merida asked, pointing an arrow behind him. "I haven't seen anything else like that around here, so it must be your doing."

"Have you lost your accent?" Sangray asked. "You're at least, oh I don't know, 20% less cute than before? Hard to know a precise number but that's my estimate."

"Oh very funny, ha ha," Susan deadpanned. *Should have expected that little barb at one point or another.*

"I know. Anyway, you mean this?" He gestured behind him at the tree and other odd stuff in the area. "You didn't forget about my other ability, did you? You were there."

Behind Sangray was a tree, a green tree. The trunk was green, the leaves were green, it was a totally green tree. Leaning against it was a large gear, at least the size of a person, which was gray. A yellow "person" made of boxes stood there, sort of a robot that people from a time a hundred years before robots were made would think one might look like. There was a ring floating about his midsection, in gold, and a brown shape flying around the tree in a wave motion. Floating next to him was an actual robot. It was hovering there and had small manipulator arms, but was only about half the size of man.

"A tree? And what's that thing, a gear? And an egg?"

"It's not an egg, it's a football. Woooooo!"

"A football?" Susan echoed. "Someone had a soul that resembled a football?"

"No accounting for taste. It flies around, it could be useful."

"What other ability?" Ami asked.

"They're souls, he can pull them out of a body and fight with them. Merida, they're your job because of your *soulbow* but remember if you break them the people may die. Shoot to

wound. We probably can't do anything to them otherwise."

"Got it."

"Ami, I need you to-"

"*Avatar of war!*" shouted Sangray, and magic swirled around him. When it cleared, a figure twice as tall was standing there, gauntleted hands now aflame. "You didn't think I was just going to let you stand there and plan stuff, did you? Attack!" He gestured to the others and the gear that was leaning against the tree suddenly became upright. At the same time the football stopped zipping around the tree and oriented on them.

In terms of *initiative*, Jack went first, probably because of his status as an artificial being that was far superior to these flesh things that were running around. Or it could have just been a roll of the dice. He vanished, making Susan wonder what it was up to.

Ami was up, and started charging her laser.

The football flew over and charged at Jenny, who was at a penalty to dodge because she was sighting down her scope at the time. Ties go to the defender! She managed to dodge it, the "ball" bouncing off the top of the building Jenny had climbed up after breaking off from the main group. (See last chapter) It made an odd sound and left a dent in the roof far larger than Jenny would have expected for such a small thing.

Merida had been tracking it, but it was pretty fast and was now spinning out of control having missed its target. She thought it was a delightful challenge and let loose an arrow anyway. With five energy spent and her skill of fifteen she rolled a thirty eight. Even with the called shot because it was so small and the fact it was a -4 and put five energy in itself, it didn't have a chance and took the arrow, now further spinning away from the battlefield. It also took six damage.

Susan ducked a little further back behind the market stall she was hiding behind and clicked her guns up to the maximum penetration setting they could be set to.

I have to assume he took Sparkle's rating in Mars, given hers is greater than mine. That means the DTR of that armor could be as high as eight. Silverstreak said the OTR of this gun goes up to seven by my reckoning, so that may not even be enough. I may not be able to even hurt this guy, or the souls, with this weapon. But I have to try, and then we'll see what other strategy I can come up with. I bet it would hurt the robot, and I don't need to see it in order to make a check against shooting it. Do minor damage though, at this setting.

The gear was now up, and rolling towards the group. It wasn't nearly as fast as the football though, so it was going to take it four segments to get to a place it could do any damage. Meanwhile, Susan was up again along with Jenny, Sangray, and Sparkle.

Susan leaned around the corner, good thing she's left handed, and sent four shots at Sangray, noting the gear was coming straight at her and she was hiding behind something made of wood, weakened by exposure to cold for who knows how long. Sangray at the same time called out "*Elemental Sniper: Fire!*" and Susan couldn't dodge as she was attacking. Luckily Sparkle was on the case, surrounding the area in a *lifestreaming* barrier figuring it was better to prevent any injury now rather than have to heal it later. Jenny put her eye to the scope again and reacquired her target; Sangray's head.

Susan got a seventeen, the absolute lowest she possibly could, but as Sangray had only taken Sparkle's *Mars* rating up to six (because he had a lot of powers to choose from in the area and needed to conserve, he didn't have unlimited potential) she actually hit. And as the DTR was only six, her shots got through. Well, one did, anyway. So he took one in the body. (Pity it was reduced in TR by the armor, making it non-lethal, and half effective because of his size) The ring seemed to move on its own to try and block the shots, but didn't manage it. His fire attack was six lower than Sparkle's *barrier* check, due to him trying to cast the spell instantly, so it bounced off.

The robot looking soul now went, and from the head of the "unit" came an energy blast, which also bounced off the *barrier*.

The gear smashed through the stall coming straight for Susan, but also bounced off the barrier, not even damaging it because it wasn't high enough TR.

Jenny now fired at Sangray's head, getting a slight aiming bonus. It bounced off his helmet.

Susan was up again, and put more shots into Sangray, aiming for the body. Three shots got through that time, as again the ring around Sangray was not good enough to stop them. He still barely felt it.

Ami, the football, and Sangray were now up, and Sangray figured he could take a few more hits before needing to heal himself, Susan's gun was obviously not all that much. He set another fire attack *inside* the barrier this time, and let it fly. I'm saying she has to dodge actively, because she's not in "*gun fu mode*" as it were, and managed a whopping eight. Thus she got hit in the left arm for 10, bringing it all the way to incapacitated. She also had to make a LUCk check against fire, which was another 8, and so her arm was now on fire.

"Oh crap!" was the least of her reactions to this situation. Sparkle was more proactive, declaring the use of card 3, *I don't think so*, which made him re-roll the hit location on the attack. This meant her right arm took 10 instead, so she was in the same situation, basically.

Shoot, I was hoping it would roll body and then bounce off her armor. Though I suppose that was rather risky, it could have been head, and then I really would have been in trouble.

Meanwhile, Ami had been releasing her plasma bolt, which because she had no skill with the weapon went wide, even with the bonus for the auto tracking it managed to do. In fact, it didn't even manage to penetrate the energy barrier Jack was maintaining (you didn't forget about him, did you?) but it did damage it significantly, as that's really what the energy pistol from Halo was designed to do, wasn't it?

Jenny of course dodged another pass by the football, which was somewhat wobbly because it still had an arrow stuck in it. It missed by a wide margin.

Merida was now up, and heard her friend's scream and saw the flames on her right arm. She was outside the barrier though, so couldn't do much about it. So she went for the football again, figuring to get it out of the way at least. It now had two arrows sticking out of it, but was still flying.

Sparkle now went, and with one paw got out a water bottle and with her "off paw" action, sliced the top off with a minor *lifestreaming* attack. "Here, dump this on it!" she called, and Susan went to grab for it, dropping her gun.

The robot attacked again, but rolled minimum so the energy blast actually went wide of the barrier, smashing into a building behind them.

"This soul sucks!" Sangray remarked, looking over at the completely pointless destruction the robot had caused. The robot hung its head in shame.

Susan was now up and doused herself with the water. Not sure what "check" that would be, but dumping some water on yourself can't be that hard right? I mean she's a martial arts expert, she can't miss. So I'll say the fire is out at least. (She is taking the full delay for the action though, not martial arts or ranged delay, so it's far higher than she's used to) Her right arm was now hanging limp at her side, unusable, and her gun had tumbled from her fingers when it got set on fire.

The gear revved up again, now heading for Merida because she was the only one in range and not behind a barrier. She saw it coming and got ready to leap out of the way.

Sangray was up again, and figured he wouldn't change a winning strategy and called out "*Elemental Sniper: Fire!*" again. Susan again dodged, and it was nine to seven if you can believe it, but this time he rolled body and her armor saved her.

Merida dodged the gear which came smashing through the fencing surrounding the marked area.

Ami decided to charge up her gun again, she had seen the shimmer and impact of the plasma bolt on the shield, and with her nineteen REASON check had figured out the robot was generating some kind of field. She decided to take it down.

Jenny took a look at the slender little sniper rifle she was using, shook her head with a look of disgust on her face, and tossed it aside. From her *pocket* she pulled a rocket launcher.

The robot was up and decided to aim this time, so energy surrounded the head as it narrowed its focus to Susan.

The football went for Jenny again, who was forced to dodge lest it get in a lucky hit. "Can you take care of this please?" she called down to Merida as it sailed by her again.

"I'm trying!" she called back.

She was up again, and sent a third arrow into it. It was twenty three to nineteen and the soul took another three whole damage which brought it, like Susan's arm, just into being incapacitated. As it doesn't exactly have a body and I just realized I hadn't been increasing the damage it took because of size (whoops) it vanished.

Hope I didn't just kill someone, Merida thought with a wince.*

"Thank you!"

Sparkle was now up. "You want healing?"

"Not now, take him out!" Susan replied.

"Okay." She turned to attack, but reconsidered. *This is literal life energy. I bet Merida isn't the only one that can hurt these souls. Let's get rid of them so we can concentrate on the boss.* So she went for the gear instead, now shaking off the wreckage of the thing it had smashed into behind Merida when it tried to run her down. She focused a *bolt* on it, and it was thirteen to seven, so she hit. That did five damage, and caused it to wobble a bit but not fall down.

Sangray and Susan now went, so she scooped up her gun while throwing herself to the side to dodge Sangray's next attack. This one was finally in her favor so it went wide.

Ami's gun was ready to fire again, so she let the plasma bolt fly. She was simply aiming in a "that way" sort of direction but the barrier was big enough that she would hit it pretty much no matter where she was aiming at. It went down, and Jack suffered some feedback, becoming visible.

Yes!

Susan now shot at it, figuring also along the same lines to remove Sangray's support so they could focus on the man. It didn't really have LUCK, being a machine, and her right arm penalties didn't affect her left arm so she put four shots into him. This brought him to **one** from gone, meaning he was going to start malfunctioning at whatever he tried next.

Wait a second. What cards do I have? An endless ammo, which I have anyway thank you, and a Damage Add. Sure, I'll declare that one on the highest attack shot I made. She didn't turn in the *endless ammo* so she missed her chance, what could she be planning? This was on eight, which brought that shot up to twelve and put him over the edge. He crashed to the ground in a shower of sparks.

"Hey, I liked that robot!" Sangray chided her.

"You did?" Susan was incredulous.

"Nah, not really."

I am going to shoot you so much.

Merida dodged the gear again, which couldn't get much of a rolling start this time, and so simply passed her by.

Sangray now saw Jenny standing there with a rocket launcher pointed at his face and knew he had no energy barrier support anymore. "*Ice Barrage!*" he called, and from nowhere above her, jagged spikes of ice started raining down.

"Hey, that's an ice technique, stop stealing my powers!" Ami huffed.

Meanwhile, Jenny was standing there and taking it, because she has her own energy shields, duh. You didn't think she would leave the Borderlands universe without that too, do you? Please. But she started taking a beating and hoped her shield would hold up long enough to at least get one shot off.

The robot now fired, having aimed as much as it could at the people inside the barrier. It let loose and got an eleven, once again showing the utter futility of it doing anything. It felt bad in a way only a yellow, glowing robot made of someone's soul that was being forced to fight against its will could. Sparkle's barrier did take another nine damage, however, as it had hit, after all.

Ami and Jenny were now up, so Jenny fired her rocket. There was a huge explosion near the tree (which was unharmed) and Sangray, who had tried to dodge and managed it to a certain extent, only took half damage. That meant he was down by six, because he was also a +1 size modifier now so really it was a quarter of the damage.

Ami started changing the gun again.

Sparkle and Susan were now up at the same time, Sparkle of course went for the gear again, blasting it with green energy. It almost managed to dodge, but because of the penalty it

was already under didn't manage it. The gear vanished, leaving only the mysterious tree, ring, and energy blast firing robot remaining. Susan did the only thing she could do- four more shots at Sangray. She hit three times, doing ten non-lethal damage.

Jenny fired again, having 4 rockets in the clip, while Merida also turned and fired at Sangray, making him dodge both. The arrow just nicked him, doing only a single point of damage as it ignored size and armor, targeting the soul as it did. The explosion did a little bit of damage to him, but he seemed willing to continue.

Ami let the trigger go on her weapon and another ball of plasma streaked towards Sangray, but with a two roll and a +2 bonus she may as well have just shot straight up in the air.

I need to find another way to contribute. Why isn't there anything I can hack around here? I should have hacked the robot, I'm so stupid! That's why it was here, and I just let it get blown up. Stupid, stupid, Ami. She looked around, but didn't see any machinery that might be useful. *Maybe some of those grenades Jenny gave me...*

The "robot" decided to spend all fifteen energy it had left in one energy blast and started gathering for it, a bright shine appearing where the beam came out and a whine filling the air.

Jenny took a reactive action to jump free of the structure she was standing on as it collapsed around her, having taken too much ice damage to remain standing. She got a thirteen on *tumbling* and didn't take any damage from the fall, at least. But she had lost her sniping perch, and line of sight to rain more rockets down.

Susan holstered her gun and held her hand out to Sparkle. "Heal my arm, quick!"

"Wha?"

"What are you up to?" Sangray wondered aloud, cutting off his icy barrage now that the person under it was no longer, well, under it.

"You got it," Sparkle replied, touching the arm. She willed her healing energy into it, managing a twenty meaning she healed four points of damage to it. Susan flexed it and her fingers, all she needed was one point back so it wasn't incapacitated anymore.

"Good enough." She lifted her watch to her face. "They know we're here, send my mech!" (You didn't forget she owned one of those, did you?)

"Transiting now," came the replay, and Susan's mech shimmered behind her and appeared with a burst of air and a thunderclap.

"Oh, you are not climbing into that," Sangray chided her.

"Watch me!" She did, the hatch closing as she jumped into it and it came to life.

Naturally it had been fitted with the touch based cybernetic systems so while she was no expert at piloting the thing, she didn't need to do that much piloting. She just had to shoot the freaking enormous gun that it was carrying. "Dodge this," she intoned, mentally declaring the use of card 45, *endless ammo*, and pulling the trigger.

This shot 100 bullets *per second* at Sangray, each doing 3d12 damage to whatever it hit, divided in half of course for his size. (that's 20 per segment) The shot just barely got through the armor so it was doing non-lethal damage to him, but even missing 1/20 of the time, (she hasn't raised her *rifle* skill very much, just pistol, but it is also passing through the same information her pistols do directly into her brain so she's getting a +6 to hit) that's a bullet per segment and her delay in *mech combat* was her base of seven. That's at least 140 bullets before she can even think of doing something else, so we'll say that's what hits him and starts driving him back. Naturally, with a magazine of 50 shots one would only get one half second of fire at full auto. But cards don't respect natural laws, and so Susan can hold down the trigger as long as she likes until the end of the scene.

The force drove him back against the tree, and with Susan's next action she took her finger off the trigger, figuring that was probably enough.

But Sangray wasn't a gray paste, in fact the tree (which was of course unharmed by all this) and he were glowing with green energy. Everyone stood transfixed as he completely healed up, brushed his armor (now repaired) off a bit, and took a martial arts stance.

"Ready for round two?" he asked.

*Not to worry, Cole fans, he's still alive. In the comic the souls are seen to be immortal, they reform after a bit. The Cole train will ride again, baby! WOOOOOO! (end zone dance)

Sangray vs the ladies, Round 2, FIGHT

When: Two weeks later (no really what did you think?)

Where: Marketplace, center of the Old Town map, Gears of War reality

“Watch out for that-” Susan began.

“Tree!” Sparkle and Merida finished for her, reorienting to destroy it before there could be a round 3 they had to endure.

Sangray, having just been healed from the tree that had been behind him now delayed which gave the others a chance to take their actions. Sparkle was up first and made a free *magic combat* check as that’s the only skill to actually say it allows distance estimation. She knew the tree was just outside her range to hit with *bolt* but she would only be at a minus one and the tree probably wasn’t going to dodge. She got her minimum anyway, a nine, meaning an eight, meaning a six because she was still maintaining the energy barrier don’t forget. That was more than a five so she hit it, doing five damage.

Susan was up so she pressed the trigger in again. Sangray however vanished and reappeared straight across the market behind Jenny, obviously drawing *spirit step* off one person or another there.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said. “Where do I even address you, actually?” He looked the mech over, which if you don’t recall has sort of a bubble canopy over the front instead of a clearly defined head. It’s meant for work in space, after all, so it’s a sealed chamber inside.

“How about my fist!” Susan cried in defiance, but it was probably lost because the gun was rattling away now which was really, really loud. She could hear him because the mech automatically dampened the sound of the gun while leaving voices clear, it was just built that way.

Merida shot at the tree which again, didn’t go anywhere, doing four damage because a person with a fifteen skill shooting at a stationary object still has to roll damage separately like the rest of us. I suppose it is only an arrow, but she could have just as easily done twelve damage... but I digress.

Ami put the gun in her *pocket* and drew out a grenade with her other hand, ready to prime and throw it.

Jenny now had Sangray to contend with at close range and had no desire to blow herself up so she whisked the rocket launcher away and plucked a shotgun out of thin air, one that was acid type. Sangray looked at her like “oh really?” but then he didn’t know what type of elemental damage it did, now did he? How could he, really? It could have been glowing green simply by coincidence, there was all sorts of guns in the multiverse even he couldn’t keep track of them all.

Sparkle went again, this time doing a called shot for damage which honestly doesn’t get used very much does it? She took a minus 4 penalty and got an eleven to hit, more than enough. This allowed her damage to be eleven, far more respectable. Of course it made her delay an eleven as well, (yes, eleven was rolled two times a row, and her delay happened to be that, deal with it) probably why it’s not used very often. In any case the tree vanished.

Sangray was now up and bashed the energy barrier to try bringing it down. He had a pretty good STrength at the moment because of the spell and his current size, so he did eleven (I’m serious, he rolled a 2 first, I spent XP on him because there weren’t no way I was letting that pathetic damage stand, and he got an eleven. I’m telling you it happened) plus four fire damage.

“Just drop it,” Susan told her, dropping the gun before she got tempted to shoot him and accidentally hit one of her friends with a hundred bullets. “He’ll get in sooner or later.” She held her action, waiting for him to come to her. *We know he can get my spell of elemental sniper through it anyway, so it’s not doing us much good against him in the first place.*

“You got it boss.”

Merida now shot him in the back. She may as well not have bothered, she did one damage to him. Honestly, a thirty roll, and one damage. She could have plucked a fly off a wall a half a mile away with that roll, but nope, one damage.

Sangray waited to see if Sparkle would take the barrier down, as she had been

instructed. As it was then her action, she did, and both Sangray and Susan leapt for each other.

Both went to punch the other, Susan deciding to sacrifice her mech which could be repaired for a better chance at taking him down. The mech has an effective STrength of twenty two, but only attacks at DTR 4. It's blunt damage though, and rattling around inside armor is going to hurt pretty badly even if the armor is magical in nature. It's also DTR 7 while Sangray is punching her with fire of OTR 6 and a fist OTR 2. That was never going to work. So she did all of eleven damage to him (I swear I am not making this up. Her maximum was 44, and she rolled eleven.) This was to the right arm, so I guess their fists did one of those things where they smash together and windows break over in the next county? Yeah, let's go with that. Of course he reduced it by half so it's only five. Out of forty.

Ami went to activate and throw the grenade but held off, the explosion might hit Susan too. So she held for the moment.

Sangray and Susan were up again, so they made their attacks. This time it was eight damage to the body, and Sangray began to realize he probably couldn't hurt her this way. Nor could he reach her with magic because he couldn't see her. And hitting the mech with a bit of fire wasn't going to be very effective. He figured he would try something else next time.

Merida shrugged and shot him in the back again, doing a called shot for damage which really isn't used... oh I said that already. She took a minus five bringing her down to "only" human level maximum and got a twenty three and eight damage. Or four total.

Jenny now stepped behind him and fired off a shotgun blast, acid type, at basically point blank range to avoid hitting Susan who was in front of them both. Somehow she got a nine to hit, and Sangray had no time for that so he dodged out of the way. This of course meant Susan had to dodge out of the way too, and given how crappy that roll was, both managed it. (Putting energy into REFlexes to do so)

"Watch it!" Susan chided her.

"Sorry, I guess I'm not as practiced with this one..."

Susan went to hit again, and Sangray spirit stepped away from there, beyond where he had been before, basically to the other side of the map. The others clustered together to chase him.

"Wait!" he cried, putting his hands up.

"You giving up?" Susan asked him.

"I just want to say something..."

"So say it."

"Piccolo special beam cannon fire?"

"What?" That didn't sound like an ice attack, and she was pretty sure no one had any techniques like that. Nor was he pointing, so what was he up to? Actually a distraction. Because the yellow robot (you didn't forget that cute little guy did you? Shame on you) was finally ready to fire, so he did.

This blast would have basically killed everybody, doing 3d10 damage to at least two locations and at least one person would have taken 22 damage to the head, but the robot fired on segment 62, while Sparkle and everyone else technically went on 60. So she had time to race to the center and put up another barrier. She got a twenty three on it, meaning the beam bounced off and everyone was saved. *Thanks Sparkle! Extra kitty treats when we get home.*

The energy of the robot soul was now zero and it vanished, pleased that it hadn't actually been forced to kill anyone.

But Sangray scowled, wondering what his next move should be.

Jenny was now holding the wrong sort of weapon and figured she would hold, getting the launcher out again would take another two actions and she figured he would be back over here in a second anyway.

Merida had no such restrictions, she let loose another arrow to seek his brain, doing a respectable nine damage this time.

"Give up," Susan told him, scooping up her gun again. "You can't get through this barrier before I shoot you full of holes again. No more tree."

"I could always put up some cover."

“What cover?”

“*Magical Ally: Major!*”

“Oh crap!”

Suddenly there was a +2 sized armored dragon standing in the middle of the square, roaring and looking dangerous.

I am seriously starting to get annoyed with this guy.

“How dangerous is that thing?” Ami called to her.

“Very dangerous!” she managed to get out, as Sangray called out to it, “Destroy them all!”

It leapt at the barrier, smashing into it and doing twenty five damage to it. It shimmered and flickered, but stayed up.

“It won’t take another hit like that!” Sparkle called.

Susan got between the thing and her friends, and knowing it was probably futile pulled the trigger on her gun anyway. Her shots were doing OTR 7 and it was DTR 7 so her shots were at least doing non-lethal damage to it. Divided by 3, but felt nevertheless. Jenny stepped up behind her, shoving her shotgun out and pulling the trigger against it, at the very least helping to melt some of the armor off the front of it.

Ami now activated her grenade and threw it at Sangray, which made it teleport over to him and stick on as it had done with the goons before, and Merida of course went for the head again. Both chipped away at his health, and he wondered if this wasn’t enough to satisfy his boss.

Susan was still shooting at the dragon, which now smashed through the barrier and went to grapple her. She just kept the gun pointed at the belly of the beast and wondered if the narrator was even bothering to keep track of each individual bullet or just figured eventually it would go poof.

Sparkle did a called shot to Sangray’s head but she missed.

Susan and Jenny shot the dragon some more, which was trying to claw through the mech to get at the soft chewy center inside.

Then Ami made up for her earlier lapse in judgment by throwing something at Sangray. Not a grenade, as he would have expected, but a Poké-ball, and she put all the energy she could into her check. She only got a ten though, which normally wouldn’t be enough to hit anything but the most stationary of objects. But Sangray’s penalties were piling up, and even he couldn’t spend unlimited amounts of energy so she managed to hit him.

The dragon vanished, and Susan figured it had finally taken enough damage to expire, so swung her gun out to where she last saw Sangray. He was gone. She only got a nine on her *perception* check so she didn’t notice the ball, but she did stop shooting.

The ball wiggled back and forth a few times and clicked closed.

“Got him!” Ami announced, pumping her fist.

“What?” Susan asked, her ears ringing from all the gunfire.

“There!” she pointed and now Susan saw the ball, and broke into a huge grin. “Nice job!”

“Thanks.”

The scene was over, and Susan dutifully reloaded her gun as the card demanded.

“Where did you pull... how did you... never mind,” Merida tried to ask her.

“Anyone hurt?” asked Sparkle. “Besides you, Susan.”

Everyone looked everyone else over and shook their heads.

“Great. Let’s figure out our next move before more troops come. You want healing now, Susan?”

“Might as well.” She cracked the mech open and climbed out, letting Sparkle heal her the rest of the way.

“Ah, that’s better. Thanks. And for the save, losing my left arm would have been awful.”

“What save?” asked Jenny.

“It’s a *paragon* thing, never mind.”

“Oh, okay. So, is someone going to pick that ball up?”

“Ami? You threw it, so...” Susan suggested.

“Sure.” She walked over to it but as she bent down to pick it up, it vanished. “Hey!”

“Well done, ladies,” said a voice from a hidden loudspeaker. “Sorry though, he’s too valuable to lose. Even if he only managed to delay you fifteen seconds, that’s an academy record! I will however let you into my prison. It’s in the bell tower right to your right. Take the elevator down. Then climb up the ladder quickly and then turn yourself around. Open the umbrella up and answer the phone, you can do it with a partner you can do it all alone.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Seriously?” asked Susan, who knew exactly where that had come from, it was in her brain from the “leakage” she had gotten from The Darkness. That weird “do the Donkey Kong” song.

“Lighten up, Susan. You should be happy, you’re almost done with your mission to rescue your father. You never stopped to ask though, what if your father didn’t *want* to be rescued? See you soon.”

The door to the bell tower clicked open, and everyone tensed as they expected things to pour out of it. But nothing did.

“Susan to Hub, we’re going in. Take the mech back, it won’t fit where we’re going.”

“Copy that. Good luck.” The mech shimmered and vanished again.

“Better be ready,” Jenny said, coming back from getting her rifle from where it had fallen. “Who knows what other surprises it has waiting in there.”

“You don’t think your father actually joined The Darkness, do you?” Ami asked.

“I hope not.”

“Come on, it’s just messing with you,” Jenny said, patting her on the shoulder. “Let’s get out of the cold and see what other butt we can spank today.”

Everyone nodded and made sure guns were fully loaded again, armor was tight, shields were recharged, and they were ready. Susan had both pistols out once again, and took point, creeping into the bell tower where she saw the brightly lit elevator beckoning them.

“Go down together or in pairs?” she asked, when she saw the way was clear.

“Together,” everyone answered.

“And if it should just drop us?”

I wouldn’t do that. Promise. Believe me, I want to see the look on your face when you get down there.

Whatever you’ve done, I’ll get through it just like I always have.

Sure, sure. Gonna be so great.

Merida pushed the button for the lowest floor in the place, and the door closed. Cheery music filled the elevator as it slowly descended.

“Really? Can you cut the music?” Susan demanded. She got no reply, but perhaps the volume was increased just slightly? She raised the gun to threaten the speaker it was coming out of but just shook her head and let it be.

The doors eventually opened again to a hallway that looked far newer and better cared for than the building above had been. It actually reminded her of the hallways in the Andromeda as it was just unadorned metal, and lit from above by harsh, white tube lights. It went a fair distance, with doors on either side of the hallway spaced somewhat far apart. Some meters down the hall it split and went left and right.

“Which way? Should we try all the doors?” Merida asked.

“I actually expected to either be greeted by dozens of those creatures or get further instructions on where to go,” Susan admitted. “Let’s try the doors and see if anything’s unlocked.”

The group crept forward, and there were two doors across from each other. The door on the right seemed to have a keypad on it, while the door on the left seemed to just have a doorknob. “Try the unlocked one first?” suggested Ami softly. “I’ll see about cracking the code for the other one.”

“Good plan.” Susan holstered one of her guns and gingerly touched the doorknob like it

might come alive and bite her. When it didn't she turned it and quickly yanked it open. Inside were two of the alien soldiers with most of their clothes off who jerked their heads and froze as the door came open. They had their arms around each other and Susan didn't want to see what sort of bits they had.

Okay, that wasn't exactly what I was talking about when I said about seeing your face. That's later. This though, that's just priceless.

"Oh, it's just you, Susan," said the closer one, relaxing from being a statue. "You certainly gave me quite a fright, yanking the door like that. Do you need something from the closet?"

Susan's eyes darted about the tiny room they were jammed into, and it seemed like a closet all right. Paper towels, a mop, spare parts, that sort of thing was crammed into the narrow shelves, and yes, some had been knocked over and onto the floor by what had been going on a moment before.

"Uh..."

"Oh, come on," said the other. "Stop looking so shocked. You've found us in *far* more compromising positions than this one."

"Indeed so," said the first. "Say, who are your friends? If it's more than three you have to buy a ticket if you want to watch."

"Sorry... for disturbing you..." Susan gently closed the door.

"That was odd," came the muffled voice of the first.

"Yes. Say, you don't expect that was the other one, do you?"

"Don't be absurd. I'm sure we would have been told... to expect..." There was a moment of silence.

"Ah well, not our problem either way, right?"

"That's true! We're not dead, it couldn't have been! Probably her father just playing a prank again, watching us come in here on the monitors and then asking her to get a new roll of tissues or something."

"I knew you were more than looks! Come here you sexy thing!"

The following noises were too graphic to describe as the pair resumed their "activities," and the group silently backed off.

"Er, what did he mean by 'the other one' do you think?" Merida asked, looking at Susan with concern.

"I'm sure it's nothing," she answered, face both white with shock and flushed with embarrassment at the same time. "Haven't you got that door open yet, Ami?"

Reunion

When: The two haven't come out of the closet

Where: Just outside the closet door

"Right!" decided Susan. "From now on we use Sparkle to tell us if there are any... people... behind the doors before we yank them open."

"Good policy," Jenny concluded.

"I forgot, not having my powers," Ami admitted, "that she could do that."

"I was going to suggest it," Sparkle told them, "but she just went and yanked it open."

"Yell or something next time!"

"We're in the middle of an enemy prison! I'm not going to yell."

"We're hardly at the start though, not the middle."

Everyone looked over at Ami.

"Well we are!"

"Actually, if you all would get behind me?" Sparkle walked a bit forward and concentrated. "Nothing but stuff behind me, which I presume is you all. Let's go forward."

"But the doors," protested Susan. She was clearly *curious* about what was behind this one.

"Look, we're trying to find your father, right? We know he's here, or at least we believe he is. Along with him should be his other party members. That's four in total. If I don't sense any life here that means he's not here, and we should move on."

"I suppose if you want to be all rational about it."

Everyone looked around and nodded, agreeing that was a good point. They moved up, allowing Sparkle to remain in the lead and sense things out. At the end of the hallway they were faced with a choice. The right side led to a shorter hallway that ended with another door that had a doorknob, while the left went further and then cut right.

"Let's check that one," Susan suggested, pointing right.

"You got it." Sparkle went down there and concentrated. "Several life forms in this room," she announced.

The group started forward, but Susan had a thought and held them back. "Wait a second, wait a second, get back here." She pulled them back around the corner again.

"What's up?" asked Jenny.

"I'm going to try something. What those other two said, and the way they acted. Something's nagging me."

"What are you thinking?" asked Merida.

"Just be ready to cover me if this goes wrong."

"Aye."

Susan holstered her gun and walked confidently to the door. "You too, be ready to shield me if this either isn't my father or is more soldiers who start attacking me."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I don't know, but it's odd, don't you think? Those two? What they said? Something's going on around here..."

"You're the boss."

"Better start acting like it." She took a deep breath, turned the handle on the door, and swung it open enough to poke her head inside. She saw a room that looked like a security office, with monitors and computers across from her that clearly showed the group cowering down the hall. But the aliens in the room were focused on the card game going on in the middle of the room, not the monitors. There were two empty chairs, a lot of empty bottles strewn around, and the four that were there looked over at her.

"Hey Susan, want us to deal you in?" one asked.

"Uh, looking for my dad?" she asked, trying to sound confident.

"He isn't guarding his buddies? He's usually there..." said another.

"I, uh, keep getting lost trying to get there?"

They all broke out laughing. "You and your *no sense of direction*. Honestly, you would

think by now... Down the hall, follow it right. Second door on the left, down the hall, second right, third door on the right.”

“Of course! I was taking the wrong door. Thanks fellows.” *Please be fellows, please be fellows.*

“Hey, you didn’t happen to pass these two losers?” asked the third, pointing to the empty chairs.

“They’re, uh, in the closet?” She jerked her thumb in that direction.

The group started to whoop it up and slap each other on the back. “You owe me twenty bucks!” said one to the other.

“Crap!” they replied, grabbing a bunch of odd currency from the table and slapping it into the open palm of the other. “I should have known. I should have known!”

“See you guys later!” Susan backed off, trying to keep her expression neutral.

“Later!” they chorused as she closed the door.

“Something very odd going on here,” Sparkle said, looking as worried as a cat can look.

“Is this some giant gag? Is my father here at all?”

“Only one way to find out. But I don’t like this.”

“Neither do I. Come on.” She gestured to the other girls and headed down the hallway. With the fifteen total (Sparkle assisted) on her KNOwledge check to remember the directions, Susan stood before the door the off duty soldiers or whatever they were had told her to take.

“There’s life on the other side,” Sparkle assured her. “But this could just as easily be a trap we’re walking straight into.”

“But why bother? The Darkness isn’t one for jokes, or wasting energy. There’s something else at work here. The taunting in my head, those guys seeming to know me. It doesn’t add up.”

“Whatever happens, we face it together,” Jenny told her.

“We’re behind you, one hundred percent,” Ami agreed.

“But just to be safe...” Merida began, and fished something out of her *pocket*. She set it on the floor and powered it up, and a force-field sprang from the front of it. “It won’t last too long against sustained fire, but at least we’ll get some warning if something comes from that direction.” She put another one down after the door, boxing them in yes, but just smacking it from this side would turn it off. From the other was a different story. It was worth the risk.

“Good thinking!” Susan praised her. “And thank you all, for doing this for me. You really are risking your lives, and I won’t forget it.”

“We wouldn’t let you,” Jenny joked.

They all shared a chuckle, then turned serious again. “I’m opening it.”

“We’re ready.” Weapons were raised, Ami got out a grenade in one hand and had her plasma pistol in the other.

Susan opened the door.

Two figures sitting at a table playing some sort of holographic game looked over at her as the group squeezed through the door. One of them was a man with black hair and a small goatee. He had on a purple robe and a stylized wooden staff was resting on the table within reach. This matched the description and the photos Stacy had shown her daughter, and tears threatened to form in Susan’s eyes as she looked upon her father for the very first time.

But what, why isn’t he in a cell? asked The Darkness smugly. *And who is sharing his company?* She looked over at the other person in the room. The other person, that was Susan.

“Oh look dad, it’s the clone,” Susan said to her father lightly, turning the game off. “Someone’s slacking off at the front gate, as usual. Oh, gods, I bet those two are making out *again*.”

“Buh?” Susan managed, looking herself over. She had long red hair, and wasn’t wearing armor but instead jeans and a t-shirt with “immersion scientist” printed on it. A device

not unlike the one Susan wore was at her wrist. Her eyes were just as black, and she had the sort of expression one might see when it was time to put down a favorite dog. "I guess we'll have to take care of it," Susan went on.

"I suppose so," her father agreed. "But we could at least introduce ourselves first. She does think she's come all this way to rescue me, after all. And her friends, at least, are real people and deserve our consideration."

"All right, what kind of game are you playing here?" Jenny demanded, brandishing the shotgun. "Who are you people?"

"Jenny, isn't it?" Elysian asked. "I don't suppose if we give you an explanation, you might be persuaded to just leave?"

"It would have to be a pretty darn good one. She's been looking for you for years now!"

"Oh dear. My master really did allow that experiment to keep running. I mean the proof is before us, but still, it's a bit of a shock. I can't say I'm surprised."

"Start talking," Merida demanded, bow held ready. "Who are you really?"

"I really am Susan's father, my Susan, anyway." He indicated the Susan at the table. "Elysian Tarsisis, at your service."

"That is not me!" Susan spat, finding her voice. Her guns came up. "Shall I prove it?"

"Oh dear, there's no need for that," Elysian chided her. "Look, can we get some more chairs here? And perhaps some tea? This is going to take a bit of explaining." Chairs formed out of the floor and a teapot with cups and a sugar bowl materialized. "Please, sit."

The group moved further into the room, spreading out but still covering the two, and none sat. Susan looked past them, and there were three cells at the far wall with energy barriers covering the openings. Susan could see a small dog now looking up and interested in what was going on. There was an elegant lady with pointed ears in the center cell, and to the right a very pale boy that was pounding on the barrier and seemed rabid.

"I don't believe this," Sparkle said. "We traveled together, Elysian. I vaguely remember these people. This is how you treat those who were traveling realities with you?"

"Ah, you've grown a bit," Elysian said to her. "I didn't recognize you, but I do seem to recall a talking kitten I found somewhere. Sorry, what was your name?"

"Sparkle."

"Of course, that spot on your chest, how could I forget? Yes, these poor fools simply refuse to acknowledge my master I'm afraid. What else can I do? I can't have them *wandering* and causing more trouble. Of course," he looked over at the white guy who was still just madly throwing himself at the barrier, "he's a bit far gone now to decide to do anything. My master insists I keep him alive by giving him energy, but without being able to feed for himself, I'm afraid he's gone mad with hunger. Such a pity." He shrugged. "Not that he was all that helpful a *wanderer*, with that hunger of his. I was more concerned with him attacking us to justify... anyway, that's neither here nor there."

"You've joined forces with The Darkness?" Susan seemed not to be able to believe what she was hearing.

"Don't be so dramatic," Susan gave back. "*The Darkness*, like he was some kind of black hole, or dark matter."

"It is! It destroys realities! It destroyed your reality, father. Did you forget why you started wandering?"

"It doesn't destroy them," Elysian insisted. "Simply changes their energies into something more. Something greater. My master will ascend to new heights, and we will follow behind and become greater than we ever dreamed. Come, sit! Let us explain and you can decide your next course of action."

The girls shared a look and Ami pulled Jenny and Merida out of the room again. Susan and Susan stared daggers at each other, but neither was starting anything.

"What do we do?" Ami asked the other two softly.

"What can we do?" Merida asked. "Susan's father is just sitting there, making no threatening moves. How can we just attack him?"

"And maybe that other Susan is the real Susan," Jenny added.

"What does that even mean? Our Susan is the one who wanders, who met us, and saved our worlds," Ami protested. "She's the real one as far as I'm concerned. And we know

what Silverstreak said to us before we left.”

“That we might have to take matters into our own hands if something like this happened,” Jenny agreed disgustedly. “But that assumed he was attacking us. I don’t feel right just gunning him down if he’s just sitting there. And another Susan? Not even he saw that coming. He believed Elysian would be more like that pale fellow there, and just attack on sight. He’s lucid, and just sitting there.”

“Maybe that’s the point?” Merida figured. “To mess us up.”

“How do we know this is the real Susan’s dad? If there can be a fake Susan, there could be a fake dad. He didn’t remember Sparkle’s name...”

“But The Darkness could have told him that, if he was an imposter. That doesn’t add up.”

“Your tea is getting cold!” Elysian called to them.

“Let’s just see what he has to say,” Ami concluded. “Look for an opening, maybe. We know the layout now, maybe we can call the Hub and get those people out of their cells?”

“Could you hack into the system keeping them in place?” Jenny asked.

“While sitting and drinking tea?”

“I don’t know how hacking works!”

Ami sighed. “Who does? Come on.”

The girls sat and took their tea, not that any of them drank any. You think they’re stupid? Do you? Well? Of course not. Susan did not sit, and Sparkle by her side was checking out the others now that she was closer. Both were alive, and if she was feeling this right, Other Susan had so much energy it may as well be unlimited in terms of a fight. *If this Susan has my Susan’s magic, I would not want to fight her. How in the world does she have so much energy? A ‘gift’ of The Darkness? I suppose my Susan could have that, if her Darkness points overwhelmed her.* And of course the staff was “alive” but Sparkle already knew that. Good to see her senses confirm it though.

“So you’re wondering about how there came to be a clone Susan.” He indicated Susan, our Susan, or Proper Susan. “I’ll tell you. You know how she came from the world of wanded magic users?” Everyone nodded their heads. “Good. And you know I went there in search of my current master, who was at the time devouring my world. Well, that’s about all that’s true. She may have told you about a note I left her, but that’s a fiction. Here’s the real story: After we arrived there and looked around the current avatar for my master approached us. This was rather novel, it had never done this before. It offered me a deal. Said there was a remarkable woman on this reality I should have a child with. It said that doing that would mean this reality would be spared. But then it further said that doing something more once the child was born would mean that *my* reality would be as well. Naturally we didn’t trust this very far but my master promised no harm would come to the child and I would be able to raise him or her. That they might even be a paragon magic user like me, despite the mother not being one.

“You have to understand, I was desperate to save my world by that time. There was nothing to attack there, like we had found on other realities. It was just draining it of life and power directly. The more places I went, the more I was convinced it was lost. But then out of the blue I got the chance to save it?”

“Plus you got to get it on with Susan’s mom. How did you manage that?” asked Jenny.

“I’m ashamed to say, magic. I made her fall for me with a spell.”

Susan’s expression was unreadable.

“After that I left. I was told I would be returning once the child was born to fulfill the second part of the deal, and after I saved another reality I went back. During this time I made the book, my book, better by enhancing it with a portion of my soul. My staff here was made in the same way, it holds the soul of a person very well attuned to using spiritual energy. I wasn’t sure at that time if my master would keep the bargain and wanted to be sure she could learn magic without my being around. My master said the child had just been born and so I was ordered to bring the girl to a location in another reality secretly. I left my companions for a time and did so.”

A sphere of darkness appeared above the table suddenly. “Little did he know that at the

instant of handing the child over, his soul was corrupted and he let me in.”

“You!” Susan snarled, and raised her guns to point at the sphere. It laughed. “You’re going to shoot me? A ball of darkness? What good is that going to do you?” Susan glared but lowered the guns.

Some sort of illusion?

No, that’s me. A tiny part of me anyway. Just to let you know I’m nearby I would guess.

Take off the watch and I’ll tell you for sure.

Never mind, I’m not that curious.

“Corrupted my soul? Master, please. You simply opened my eyes to the greater truth of reality. You did not corrupt me, you freed me!”

“That I did, my friend. That I did. But please, go on with your story. I can tell Susan is loving this look back into her real past.”

“At this point my master had a mission for me. Capture my traveling companions and bring them here. I did so. When I returned the child was returned to me and I was told to return her to her mother.”

“Even in the state he was in, he still protested,” the ball spoke up again. “But little did he know the child he was giving back was a fake.”

“Indeed. I did as instructed, and left the book with Susan, including some sappy note as I recall. So she could learn magic which my master said was part of the experiment. Some time later my master’s other followers showed me the real Susan, and explained how the other one was a clone. My master wanted to see if various things were possible, and he needed a strong body to do it. I’ve heard you’re actually a great disappointment.”

“Then my existence has not been wasted,” Susan informed him.

Elysian shook his head. “You have no idea what you could have become. Possibly even more powerful than my real daughter here, having been touched by the master directly. But you’ve worked against those wishes. What a shame.”

“Why did they wait?” asked Susan, despite herself.

“To return my real daughter to me? Probably to make sure I was loyal. But of course I was, and only slightly annoyed my master would even question me after all I had done in the service of the cause.”

“And them?” She gestured behind him, and he turned in his seat to look.

“Ah, my team. Sadly, it doesn’t look like their eyes can be opened like mine were. The breath stealer may have some use as a weapon. If we can get him near someone of importance he’s in no mind to think rationally. He’ll just attack. My master does believe in finding a use for everything.”

“Using the whole deer, in other words?” Merida asked.

“Exactly. So now you know. The Susan you know is false, a thing of science not nature. Whatever she has told you is colored by her unnatural existence. My master can use you, if you would care to join the cause. You too can help the ascension and thus elevate yourself. You too could become like my master is now, once the procedure is known to work. My master blazes a trail that can reward those faithful to him to become beings of power like they never dreamed. Will you at least think it over?”

“And what about this ‘defective’ Susan?” Jenny asked. “What happens to her, now that she’s here?”

“I won’t be able to use her, she’s made that much clear,” said the ball of darkness. “I think it’s about time to bring that little experiment to a close, don’t you?”

Elysian sighed a great sigh. “She looks so much like my daughter, it will be... somewhat difficult to fight her, my master.”

“So let me do it, dad. I can take her alone,” boasted Other Susan. “She doesn’t have her magic, I do.” Her right hand twitched, but she turned it into a throwing her hair back gesture. Jenny’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“Her, and all her friends?” he asked. “I’m sure they would not just allow their friend to be killed. Unless this revelation has changed your mind about her? Even just a little?” He paused, looking the group over. “No? Pity.” He took his staff in his hand and stood up. “And you won’t just depart, in peace?” He pointed to the door. “None will harass you on the way out, you have my word.”

“We have to at least make the attempt to rescue them,” Merida told him. “And we don’t care how she was made. Our Susan is the only Susan. You stand with The Darkness, you have to be stopped.”

“Exactly what I hoped you would say!” Other Susan grinned and spread her arms wide, standing up. The ball of darkness seemed to unravel itself and settled around her, forming into a dark armor. Two swords appeared in her hands. “Oh yes, so hoping you might say that.”

The group found itself standing opposite Other Susan and Elysian in a bleak, empty field.

“Shall we roll initiative?” Elysian asked.

Father and Daughter vs. Daughter

When: No time has passed

Where: Some sort of battlefield conjured one way or another

Susan was conflicted. She knew she had been an “experiment” by The Darkness, it had told her so after it started talking to her. It talking to her was the clearest evidence, she had no reason to ever doubt it. The fact she was a clone didn’t bother her that much, the technology that made her was probably sophisticated enough there would be no difference between her and her “twin” on the genetic level. She had no doubts about who she was, and the good she had done for the multiverse.

But her father. Taken over in a moment of weakness simply because he wanted to save his entire reality. He was like Sangray in that respect, but it seemed his conversion was more complete. He didn’t mind doing what he was doing, because The Darkness (presumably) had kept its word and left his home reality alone. Or it had slipped a little piece of itself in, as it had done for her. The method didn’t matter, the result did, at least for the moment. Dealing with it once he was defeated, yes, but until then it was a moot point. Sangray always had the threat of his reality being wiped out over his head and so was a more reluctant fighter. This was her dad, a skilled mage with backgrounds she didn’t even know about. And probably Darkness energy, as presumably he would be given the same “ability” to draw that she had. And being already “corrupted” he could use as much as he wanted without worry. *How much can he spend per action, anyway? Is there any spell he can’t get off instantly?*

She didn’t want to hurt her father. She believed there must be a way to save him, to bring him back to the man she always envisioned. If she could somehow knock him out without magic and get him in a Poké-ball, maybe Silverstreak could come up with something. After all, he wasn’t an avatar, right? His ideals had just been corrupted and that let The Darkness influence him. He, at least, didn’t have the dark eyes so there was still a chance. She had to believe that.

But she couldn’t let her father hurt her friends. And then there was her “original” that she had to believe had her stats, knew whatever spells she might and more, and had been trained by minions of The Darkness from an early age.

How did she get so old, so fast? From their perspective, shouldn’t that Susan be just a tiny baby?

You think you’re the only one with access to realities where time flows differently than everywhere else?

Oh. And if you had her on your side, why did you struggle so hard to get me?

Ever had just one potato chip? And I had to see if my ‘injection’ would work...

I see.

There was nothing for it. She had to fight and win the day, shooting for non-vital areas and hoping she could disable her father long enough to get him secured. But what to do about her twin? Kill her? Capture? Those black eyes and demeanor meant this version, original or not, had been consumed by The Darkness and probably couldn’t be saved. She would have loved a twin, but an evil twin? That was a bit too much even for her. If she could be captured, great, but she didn’t hold out the same hope for her as her father.

Time was moving. Ami had won the initiative, which is the way the universe works. The one character that can’t possibly do a thing gets to act first. Honestly. But she looked at the grenade in her hand and almost made a throwing motion. But she held back and looked to the others. They shrugged. Instead she started running at top speed away from the battle.

Good, get out of here Ami, there’s nothing you can do for us here.

Elysian was up and touched a strip of metal that was hanging on his belt (which is the style at this time) and said “Avatar!” He grew to +1 size, as did the staff, and of course the normal armor and flames accompanied his use of the spell.

Spell Symbol and Avatar of War. How could he not know those?

Naturally. He used to put them on his companion's swords so when they got them out, they automatically got bigger, stronger, and faster. Nice huh?

And I have to assume that's DTR 10, because he wouldn't not spend maximum energy.

That's a good assumption! He's just as cheaty as you were, back in the day when you could do magic and stuff.

That was like an hour ago!

Exactly. Have fun being on the other end for once.

Jenny tossed the shotgun and grabbed two objects out of her *pocket*, thumbing them on. Brilliant blue blades hummed to life, and she gave them an experimental swing. "I've got the duplicate," she announced. "Merida, back me up, I have a plan." She leaned over. "Go for her right arm, I need it disabled."

"Got it."

"You had *light sabers*, and you didn't share?" Susan teased her.

She looked over and grinned. "Got these while I was looking for you. Met another *wanderer* in that reality, name of Lysanias. And man, could we use his help right about now. That guy could *fight*." *Of course, he'd be as powerless as we are at the moment. Shoot, never mind I guess.*

"Tell me about it later." *If we survive.*

"Sure thing. You'd like him, even if you didn't want to get into his pants."

"Do you two *mind*?" asked Other Susan. "I know talking is a free action but this is ridiculous."

"Excuse me, *princess!*"

Sparkle was now up, and looked over at Susan. "Here," she said, touching her. Green energy flowed from Sparkle up her body, and Susan felt her TR of all things increase by five. Her health accordingly went up.

"Thanks! Didn't know you could do that."

"There's a few things you don't know my powers can do. Anyway I'm at less than half energy, so don't expect too much."

"I'm doing okay, guns are pretty good for-"

"Do you mind? I want my turn!"

"We'll get there!" Susan was up next, and she smiled. "Been saving this one. It was created with powers but it's still a form of technology. I just couldn't recharge it around here. No holding back anything now... *Velocity!*"

She started blurring as the orb still embedded in the back of her neck under her hair activated and started boosting her REFlexes. *I have the shield one full too, and the sword not that I have a great rating in that anymore. I just hope Jenny knows how to handle those blades. Lightsabers. Honestly.*

Merida was now up and as she didn't have anything fancy to activate shot at Susan, doing a called shot to her right arm as instructed.

Susan figured Merida's reputation with a bow was just hyperbole from lesser beings and "only" put ten energy into dodging. She felt more than a little surprise as the arrow shot past her armor and sank into her arm. She was now down by five out of twenty two, so she still had a long way to go before she was worried. But she was still rather annoyed.

She got to act out her aggression immediately, and touched what must have been a necklace under her clothes. "So the great Jenny Everywhere is going to try taking me down, huh? And it's two on one? Fine. Let's show you what you're really dealing with. *Ascension.*"

Magic swirled and standing there was a creature of darkness, the same size now as her father but with a bestial look and rippling muscles. The face was twisted and elongated, with teeth that jutted out in what looked like a most uncomfortable way, and light now seemed to fall into the figure and escape. The arrow, still stuck in her arm, seemed to glow less brightly as the light it gave off was consumed.

"Oh, that's what that spell does," Susan remarked.

"Bet you wish you had access to magic now," Susan taunted her.

Yeah, little bit.

Susan was now up, and wondered if there was anything she could do at the moment to stop either of her family. Her sword at maximum power could probably damage either eventually, but with her one rating in it she would never hit. But she did have *another* gun, one that didn't require too much aiming. Which was good, because she only had a one in that skill as well. But it seemed she had no choice. She put her pistols away for this action.

"You're giving up?" asked her father. "I would, in the face of what you're seeing here."

"Don't, there's still a way," Jenny insisted.

"Who's giving up? Don't tell me what to do. You're not my father." *Okay he is in a way... Do I even have a father?*

Jenny and Other Susan now went at the same time, and with her new *speed*, granted from the power of the spell, Other Susan casually crossed the battlefield and swung at Jenny. I'll say Jenny gets a reactive action because she had started moving forward as well, and didn't expect to be actively attacking currently. She blocked both and did a *riposte* maneuver, getting max with her left hand. That did nothing as it bounced off her chest.

"She's *invulnerable* because of the spell!" Susan called over to her.

"Now you tell me!"

Susan turned back to her father, grabbing out the ice shotgun she made worlds away and months ago basically as practice to see what she could do with powers. *And I really should have made more stuff, come to think of it. Especially when I figured I would be coming here where powers didn't work. Bit stupid of me, really. I blame my overconfidence.*

Sparkle and her father went at the same time, her father casting "*Immobilize*" on her instantly. He got a nineteen but the bands seemed more solid, somehow, and despite Susan throwing ten energy into breaking out and getting a twenty, she didn't manage it.

His magic was different. The symbols we paragons make when we cast where brighter, I could tell that much even seeing them for just an instant. His magic does something mine doesn't.

"Now then," he said, moving towards her. "I'll just drain your energy and that will be the end of it. You won't feel any pain. It's the least I can do."

Yes, come over here.

Sparkle jumped in front of her. "Please, Elysian, don't do this. This is your daughter!"

"That's my daughter," he indicated the other Susan. "This is only a hollow copy. Move, Sparkle, you could be of use to my master and do not need to be destroyed."

Sparkle held, waiting for him to get closer. *Not that I think I can get through that armor. My attack TR is my RESolve at best, I'm sure that armor is tougher than that. However, what I did for Susan I can do in reverse to him, and that gives me an idea.*

Merida took another shot at Susan, who decided to put a bit more effort into dodging this time. But even with fifteen energy put in Merida still beat her by eight (five energy, flanking bonus, and her size worked against her) so a second arrow thunked into her right arm for an additional eight damage.

"Oh, you'll be next," she promised.

Susan held her action to let her father get closer, she couldn't exactly move at the moment, at least that she wanted her dad to know about. With his great stride and increased STRength from the *Avatar* spell he reached her before anyone else could act and she took her action as he reached for her. She thought about a gravity ball above and slightly behind her, tipping her backwards and making her rise into the air. Her wings couldn't activate (though they tried) because they were held by the *Immobilize* spell, but she could make a wild shot with the shotgun in her father's direction. He got a nineteen to dodge, but with his size and the fact this was a technique, not an actual shotgun, she got to use her *technique attack* skill instead of *rifle*. She hit, but of course couldn't penetrate the armor. (The attack was OTR 8). She was hoping the ice might hold him for a few seconds, but no such luck. Now his size worked in his favor, and he busted out of it.

"Well done," he praised, seeming impressed. "Even now you don't give up. You could be my daughter."

Other Susan now had to contend with three attacks, one by Merida and two by Jenny.

She didn't waste effort trying to do anything fancy like parry them all, she just went *insubstantial* and the two arrows she already had in her arm fell to the ground, while the new arrow and two light saber blades harmlessly passed through her.

"Oh, come on!" both said at the same time.

Elysian now strode forward more and stuck his staff out, nearly touching Susan with it. "Ah, the fire, yes," he mused. "I did promise this would be painless. I'll just have to do it from a distance, though it's not as efficient." The gem on the end of the staff started to glow, and that's when Sparkle darted forward and touched him. She made a *lifestreaming* (*life manipulation*) check to alter *his* DTR. She managed a twenty nine on the skill and he got a thirty to resist. So she spent an XP for a +2 and reduced the TR on the armor by six.

"Now shoot him!" she cried.

"What did you do?" he asked, looking down. "I don't feel any different." Energy was flowing from Susan to the staff, but she still had it to spare so she wasn't too worried.

Susan, not one to ignore her companion shot forward by imagining her ball of gravity now in front of her and fired another shot from the shotgun. Elysian didn't bother to dodge because he just figured he would bust out of the ice again without issue, but this time it went through like tissue paper, which is basically what his armor had become. He cried out and tried to bust out of the ice that was now encasing him, but this time he had some penalties to try and deal with. So darkness flickered around him as he drew upon the same energy Susan could, spent twenty, and shattered the ice anyway.

"Perhaps I'll change my mind about finishing you painlessly," he growled.

Jenny now thrust her lightsaber blades through Susan, doing a called shot to her body. She didn't bother dodging, just looked down at her. "What are you doing, you can't hurt me like this."

"But you can't reform either, Merida take a shot at her father!" she replied smugly, having heard her because this form of *insubstantial* works a little differently than the magic version.

"Right!" She did, doing a called shot to *his* right arm, because that was the arm holding the staff up, and partly because she figured Jenny had some plan for asking that of her before and figured the same plan would work on him. (Twelve REASON check to figure that out.) She hit because he was at a -11 penalty, despite the fact he spent ten energy, and took an additional six damage to the arm. Out of forty. Yeah, gonna take a while.

Now Other Susan dodged, trying to get away from the lightsaber blades, and managed it because she didn't care how much energy she put in.

Susan fired again, but this time Elysian simply activated his energy barrier making her waste a shot as it bounced off the barrier.

Sparkle was up but couldn't get to him, but she was right next to the barrier he had made. With a mental shrug she touched it and tried drawing energy out of it. It was supernatural, after all, and was being powered by the internal "life" energy of the staff. This worked, and she got eight energy out of the barrier, leaving it with two and being severally weakened.

So Susan shot it again. The ice attack went through it this time so Elysian had to dodge, but she got an eight despite spending energy. It was eight to ten, so he dodged.

"Your being sped up is really helping you," he mused. "Have to do something about that."

"What was that?" she shouted, pulling the trigger again. This time it was more favorable, and he took a bunch more damage.

"A little help here!?" he called to his daughter.

"I've got my own problems," she called back.

Merida was going to shoot him again, but then decided to hold her shot. If Other Susan was going to go help her father she would turn substantial again and rush to his size. She

waited, putting her arrow between Elysian and her so it would be ready to fire.

Susan, sadly, had no desire to help her father and went for Jenny instead, doing a *quick change* to reduce her delay for that action. She got a twenty, meaning she did it immediately. But Jenny had made a *close combat* check to realize this and got a nineteen to fifteen. So she knew what was coming, and swung a called shot at Other Susan's right hand as she changed form. She put five energy into the attack not for STrength or COOrdination or even increasing OTR but instead to bypass her *invulnerability*. She couldn't dodge, because she was attacking, and Jenny got a fourteen on the attack. To Other Susan's surprise the lightsaber did what they've done since time began- chopped the limb off like it was nothing. Sadly, Jenny herself took twenty four damage to the right leg, meaning it was sliced clean through. Both girls cried out in agony and fell, both rolling near or at minimum on their CONstitution checks and going unconscious. Other Susan wasn't in danger of bleeding to death as her wound had effectively been cauterized by the heat, but Jenny wasn't so lucky.

Both Susan and Elysian looked over at their fallen comrades and cried out in anguish, rushing to the other's side. The bands around Susan fell away, and she took Jenny in her arms.

"Can you heal her?" Susan asked Sparkle.

"Then she would lose the leg, put her in a ball. The leg too!"

"Right." Susan dropped the shotgun and got out a Poké-ball with each hand, bouncing them off each part of Jenny and watching as the balls safely stored them away.

"You people hurt my daughter," Elysian snarled, darkness forming around him. "Now I won't make it painless."

"You won't get the chance," Merida said gaily, snapping something onto Susan's wrist. "I figured out what Jenny was going for."

"What-" Susan started, but she realized it herself as she felt magic return to her. She looked down at her twin and realized there was no more bestial form. Magic hadn't just left her because of falling unconscious because of the arm being severed. *Of course, they were being fed power from these... did she yank this off the severed arm? Eww.* "Light of the multiverse, *make up!*"

Susan was now flooded with power as she took the usual energy based backgrounds and Sparkle jumped up on her shoulder to start feeding her energy as well.

"You think that matters?" he went on, laying Other Susan down gently and beginning to rise in the air. Great black wings materialized from his back as he drew down Darkness energy. "You're just a fake, a nuisance to my master. I'll-"

And that's when Merida hit him with the Poké-ball.

"What, did you think I was just going to stand there and let him finish?" she asked innocently as the others looked over at her in surprise.

As soon as he went in the space around them vanished and they were back in the cell area. But this time, the cells were open, and the lady with pointed ears was trying to drag the pale guy off Ami, who he was basically sucking the life out of.

"Hey!" Susan managed.

The ball locked closed, as Elysian was at a twenty one penalty and only managed a twenty one on his RESolve check to break free.

"Grab them up and let's get going!" Merida said, scooping the ball up.

"Suits me." Susan threw a *force* technique over the doors, as she heard gunfire which meant they would probably be through the outer forcefields in a second. She scooped up her guns, Jenny's rifle and blades, the staff, and shoved them all into her *pocket*. Then she hauled the pale guy off Ami while the elf looking lady pulled her up with one hand. She didn't look so hot, at least in the sense of her health because Susan thought she still looked pretty hot.

"Susan to Hub, get us a door now!" she shouted, trusting the AI to not need to be told explicitly this order was to be transmitted. A glowing door opened and everyone rushed through it.

Mission Accomplished!

“Are you sure she wouldn’t want a cybernetic leg?” Silverstreak asked Susan when informed of Jenny’s injury.

“No, I don’t, but let’s just put her back the way she was and she can decide that on her own.”

“Very well. We’ve got enough science and magic around here she’ll be fine in a bit.” The Poké-balls with her and the leg vanished. “Anyone else hurt?”

“I think Ami might be.”

He turned to look at her. Standing next to her was the sheepish looking pale fellow and the lady with pointed ears, both holding her up.

“You’re not trying to attack her anymore!” Susan realized.

“Yeah, about that. Sorry,” he said. “My hunger passed with the feeding I did on her. I’m good... for a while. By the way, what’s going on? Where are we? Who are you? How long has it been? Are we safe? How did we-”

“Yes, yes, everything in due time. Ami, are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Ami managed, looking blearily around. “Just a bit sleepy. And my soul feels funny...”

“You fed on her?” Silverstreak asked.

The boy nodded and shrugged at the same time. “I guess? It’s a little hazy, but I do remember blue hair, I think?”

“Then what you’re feeling is perfectly normal. She’ll be fine with a bit of rest. Ami, I’m sending you to the infirmary too. Just find a bed and take a nap.”

“Okay,” she managed, and vanished.

“Anyone else? Hmm, you’ve got a gash,” he said to Susan.

“Never mind me, what about my father? He’s been turned!”

“One thing at a time. I’m sure we can do something about that. You three look like you’ve really been through some tough times,” he said to the three newcomers. “Why don’t you get something to eat, get changed, have a shower... maybe not in that order.”

“A bath!?” said the dog with disgust. “I’m not dirty!”

“So I guess you don’t want the meal either?”

“Well, I could use... I mean if you had some sausage... I wouldn’t say no.”

He laughed. “I’ll see what we can do.” He gestured and the elevator door opened. “This will take you to your individual rooms. Take all the time you need, and just tell the room when you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” all three said gratefully, and left.

“Meanwhile, let’s go take a look at your father.”

Silverstreak put the two Poké-balls containing her twin and her father on a machine and brought up their contents. He typed and looked over the results presented by the computer. “Odd,” he remarked at times, spinning their models around and typing some more.

“What is?”

“Who’s that?” He pointed to Other Susan.

“Me, I guess,” she groused. “Apparently I’m a clone.”

“No! Really?” He looked over at her in surprise.

“That’s what my dad said.”

“You never were. Come here.” He ran his hand over her eyes and down the front of her body. “Nooo. Can’t be.”

“Why would he lie?”

“How could he tell the truth?” he countered. “These reading show his soul has been corrupted. He’s being partly controlled by Darkvoid.”

“So it was a trick? But then who is this?”

“Maybe she’s the clone?” Merida asked.

"Is... that possible?"

"You accepted that you were a clone, but she can't be?" she asked with a smile.

"No, I mean, it's just..."

"I get it," Silverstreak told her. "The funny thing is though, she does have your spiritual energy. She was able to use your magic?" Susan nodded. "That's why. Strange though, how did she get so much."

"Ah." Susan now hesitated.

"Yes?"

"That would be my fault. Um, I sort of was sent to that reality that was all smashed up, you know where I met that cute Mimsy?"

"What a cute name," remarked Merida.

"Isn't it? Anyway, The Darkness wanted me to get some hyperlarcovite from there. It offered me a deal for it."

"I see. And what was this deal?"

"It left a bunch of babies alone in the reality with the warlocks, and would leave whatever reality I gave it ten thousand energy in, without delay. It saved a girl's life, doing that. Two girls, really. One innocent one. I mean they were both innocent but one of them—"

He held up a hand. "I get the picture. It must have taken that energy and empowered this clone of you."

"It really believed it was her!" protested Merida. "Her father thought that was his daughter too. Or, no, maybe not given what you said. Maybe he just pretended to because he was under control."

"Probably just a trick. The question is what to do about her."

"What are the options?" Susan asked.

"I could simply drain her energy, that would kill her. Once the ten thousand is used up, she'll just not be alive anymore."

"She won't recover on her own?"

"Nope. She does have your magic, she could use *energy drain* and get more, of course. But she'll always be dangerous. She was made to be the you that Darkvoid could never get you to be."

"Great. I hate to do it, but we may not have much choice."

"We can think about it. As for your father..." He shook his head. "His soul is corrupted. He's not an avatar in that sense, but he's still pretty far gone. Maybe just killing him is—"

"No!" Susan denied. "You owe me, big guy. The whole reason I started freeing worlds was to look for him. And yes, Luna, but I've saved multiple realities. I may save more. But my father lives, and we save him. Whatever magic or tech or supernatural power that takes, we search for it and we use it. Got it?"

"You think you're the first one to be put in this situation? Others have lost loved ones, Susan," he said gently. "Just be glad you found him and not another team. They would have just killed him without thought as another avatar. At least this way you can say goodbye."

"We could make him somewhat harmless though," Sparkle told him. "Take his *spark of magic* away and without the staff, he's not much of a threat to anyone."

"I suppose we have options. Go get cleaned up, have that injury looked at, and we'll see what to do next."

"Fine."

But she lingered, looking at the image of her father on the screen. *So you are my dad, and the other one was the fake. I'll save you, I promise.*

So Susan got changed and cleaned up, and when she went into the conference room, all the others were there. Luna had hung around, so she was there, and even Jenny was well enough to attend.

"You okay?" she asked, giving her a hug.

"Sure am. Bit of a shock, having your leg chopped off, but it seems fine now."

"Thanks for taking one for the team. Here's your lightsaber back." She handed one back.

"Strange, it's a bit fuzzy because the whole blood loss issue, but didn't I have two of

these?”

“Uh, the other was, uh, tragically lost... somewhere. Yeah. Couldn’t find it.”

She held out her hand, staring Susan down.

“No really-”

“We can make you one if you really want,” Silverstreak said. “Honestly, we probably have some hanging around if you wanted to look.”

“Oh, fine! Here.” She handed it over with a grin.

“Thank you.”

“Glad you made it,” Luna told her, getting a hug of her own.

“Me too.”

So everyone sat down around the table and the elf looking woman stood up. All three looked much better, even the dog looked brushed and bathed. “I just wanted to start by saying thank you to everyone. Ami, you especially.”

“Oh, it was nothing.” She blushed and looked down.

“Yeah, how did you get those cells open?” Susan asked. “You ran away from the combat, but suddenly everyone was free. How did you do that?”

“Once away from the battlefield I was back in the cell area,” she explained. “I managed to get the doors open by hacking the controls that were there, but of course got attacked by Raiuji at that point.”

“Sorry again about that...”

“It’s okay. Then you guys showed back up.”

“Worked out nicely then. Great job Ami.”

“Thanks.”

“Anyway, I’m Lyra, this is Celest,” she indicated the dog who raised a paw in greeting. “Hello!” “...and Raiuji. How’s Elysian?”

“Not good,” Silverstreak answered. “We looked over his ball, it doesn’t look good for him.”

“That’s too bad. We really relied on his magic.”

“I can do magic!” the dog protested.

“Yeah, badly,” Raiuji said under his breath, remembering more than a few fizzles and unintended consequences of her particular brand of magic.

“Be that as it may, is there any hope?”

“Not much. When did he start acting like he was taken over?”

She considered. “I guess after he was messing around with that book of his, right before he went back to leave it for you, Susan.”

“Book? You mean this one?” She got the book of magic out.

“That’s the one. He said he was going to do something to it.”

“He did. He put a bit of his soul into it so it could create magic for me. It’s come in handy a time or two. Then Silverstreak put these sensors on it, so it could analyze magical things in other realities.”

“You didn’t grab the staff, by any chance?” Raiuji asked.

“Oh yeah, here.” Susan got it out.

“Nice to get this back, at least,” he said with a nod, accepting it. “If nothing else we can still do energy stuff with this.”

“Apparently he used something similar on the book that was done to the staff. It may have even helped,” Lyra went on. “It was after that we started noticing him acting different.”

“That shouldn’t have done anything,” Silverstreak mused. “I was hoping that would be a clue.”

“Wait a second, isn’t it though?” Sparkle asked. “It gives us a pretty good idea of what happened.”

“It does?” he asked.

“Sure. You say his soul is corrupted, right? What if it actually isn’t. What if Darkvoid used some of his research from messing with Susan and when Elysian moved part of his soul into the book, The Darkness seeped a little into that void?”

“That is possible, I suppose,” Silverstreak admitted.

"Then our solution is easy," Susan gushed, growing excited. "We have the missing piece of soul right here. Just put them back together!"

"How?" Ami asked.

"Uh..."

"Don't you already have that spell?" Luna asked, thinking with magic as she was taught over many years by Susan to do.

"Do I? I have a spell to swap souls."

"No, you fought Tom when he was fused with Harry. Pulled your soul out and put it inside the hybrid. Shouldn't this be the same?"

Susan considered. "If I held the book, maybe cast the spell on it as well as myself, a ghost could move both souls into the body and let me help put him back together."

"You mean yourself and me. I have some experience in this area now too, you know. And my wand Belahime might be able to help directly."

"She means me, you, Luna, and the book," Sparkle spoke up. "She isn't going anywhere without me."

"That's what I meant," Luna agreed, making everyone chuckle.

"Now all we need is a ghost," Silverstreak figured.

Susan shook her head. "No, I made a touch version of the spell, now that I think about it. Get my father out and we'll do this."

Susan offered to lock whatever area down with her *magic domination* but Silverstreak cautioned that given they learned magic from the same book, and were father and daughter, their magic would probably be similar enough that wouldn't work.

"But he will be down to his normal total of energy," he informed her. "He won't be able to draw power from Darkvoid here."

"So I'll put the spell into a *spell symbol*, and just have it ready to cast on him when you get him out."

"Good luck."

They got him out and Susan tagged him from behind with the paper before he could react, and they found themselves in a twisted and corrupted landscape.

"That's odd," said the large owl standing with them. "I've never been outside my own soul before. A wand spirit that can travel, what will they think of next?"

Susan jumped away from it, but Luna introduced her wand, and Belahime bowed to her.

"Thank you for taking care of Luna when I couldn't speak to her," she said.

Susan recovered. *So that's what she meant. This being lives inside her wand? I suppose The Darkness is in me, so it's a similar thing. Why not?* "Of course. Thanks for giving her magic, or whatever."

"Of course. Where to now?"

"Good question." The group looked around and Susan jumped the other way as her gaze fell upon her father. He was standing there looking at his hands and down at himself.

"Dad?" she asked.

"What?" His head whipped around. "Who are you?"

"Is this really you this time?" she asked, hopeful. "Elysian? Father of Susan?"

"Why wouldn't it be? What's going on, where are we? I was supposed to be putting my soul into my book to give to my daughter, but now I'm here. Where's the book? How do you know my daughter's name?"

Susan didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "You're the copy inside the book, and I'm your daughter, Susan," she explained. "We got you here because we need your help." *I thought I would just have the book in hand, not actually have part of his soul next to me. This is great! Or does it make this more difficult?*

"You're... Susan? I'm that piece of soul?" He looked her up and down. "You're no baby, I guess you grew up!"

She laughed. "People tend to do that. It's good to see you again, dad." She held her arms open and Elysian hugged her.

"You better catch me up on what's going on," he finally said. "I take it something major

happened, given where we seem to be?"

"That's an understatement." She gave this part of her father the rundown, and what they needed to do.

"Find yourself here, and get back together. That should shove out The Darkness."

"The who? Oh, is that what you call it? Our group tends to call that thing Existence Eater."

"It showed itself to me as a figure of darkness first, so the name stuck." *Given what it was doing to your reality, I can see where that name came from.*

"I see. Any idea how to find, uh, me?"

"When I've been in these sort of places in the past, I was able to find things just by concentrating on them." She looked at her father a little sadly. "I don't really know you all that well, so that might not work this time."

"Nonsense!" he assured her. "Who better than me to lead you to me? Take my hand and I'll try to find my other half."

She did, and Luna took hers, and Belahime took hers, and Sparkle jumped on Susan's shoulder as usual.

"Oh, Sparkle, is that you? My, you're not a kitten any more either. I bet you've got lots of stories to tell."

"Some."

"Hope I get the chance to hear them. Now, just concentrate on the thing you want to find, right?"

Susan nodded, and Elysian looked out across the battered landscape. This area had probably been some kind of forest at one time, but only burnt out trunks and lighting blasted rocks remained.

"I'm going to have to do some work on this place when I get myself together," remarked Elysian, and concentrated on what he knew of himself. The landscape shifted and flew by them, and there was a large tree before them. The trunk had grown up into the shape of bars, and Elysian sat inside it, not moving. The trunk looked big enough for him to maybe stand up and take one step in either direction, but above and below the center space of about a meter was solid tree. A black form was leaning against the trunk.

"So you came in here to- what the heck is that?" The figure pointed, and everyone looked past where he was pointing. Even Elysian looked over his shoulder.

"Did we just fall for the oldest trick in the book?" he asked no one in particular. "I don't see anything."

"What's what?" Susan asked him, turning back.

"That!" It continued pointing to Elysian. "He's supposed to be..." He stopped leaning and looked around the tree trunk. "He is still... oh, that's the book copy, isn't it? That new watch of yours that keeps me from telling me what's going on is really annoying."

Oh, so sad.

"Indeed I am. Get out of my soul," Elysian commanded.

"Oh, you have no power here," The Darkness said to him. "You're just a visitor, like them." He indicated Susan and the others. It did a double take. "And what the heck is that thing?" It was looking at Belahime.

"Don't know everything, do you?" she asked, clicking her beak.

"Actually I was kind of wondering that myself, but I travel with a talking dog so I just figured it was a friend of hers," admitted Elysian.

"Much more than that," Belahime assured them both. "I see the truth of you both."

"And what truth is that?" The Darkness sneered.

"I see your fear. That there are beings above even you, looking down and thinking how small you are. How pathetic. But you already know them, they're standing before you." She raised a hand to point fingers at Luna and Susan.

"What, them? I could destroy their worlds like that!" He snapped his fingers. "I just wouldn't get the energy from it. You think *them* greater than me?"

"Not in stature, perhaps. But in various ways, yes. They look at you and think how a being such as yourself could go so wrong. How with all the power it claims to have, why is it so afraid? Why does it seek to improve itself by claiming the lives of so many others, when it

surely could find a path without such destruction? Has Susan not striven to be more? Has Luna? They managed to do so, did they not? But you, instead of learning from them and seeking to emulate their success you simply wish to take what they have without even knowing if such a theft will improve your chances at all.”

“I will not be lectured by some half aware piece of *wood*.”

“Then depart, and learn nothing. My words are the truth of you.”

“You can’t make me do anything.”

“Perhaps not. But he can.” She gestured to Elysian, who as The Darkness had been distracted by Belahime’s little tirade had made his way to the tree and was about to grasp his own hand.

“What?” The Darkness looked over. “Wait, no!” The two joined hands, and everything went white. When Susan opened her eyes she was being hugged by her real father, and everyone was smiling and tearing up.

“Dad?”

“Hey Susan. Thanks for coming to get your old man.”

Susan wasn’t sure what to say, tears were flowing from her eyes. “I had to come find you. You owe me so many birthday presents,” she managed at last.

Everyone, even Silverstreak, laughed at that, and everyone was hugging everyone else. Expect for Raiuji, who had the *creepy* background so could you really blame them?

Epilog

When: Two months later

Where: Home

Susan was dreaming. She knew she was dreaming, because Silverstreak was standing there in the wheelbarrow she was pushing on the wing of that plane she was trying to grow tomatoes on.

“Just thought I would check in,” he said, as Susan became aware.

“Hey boss!” she said, letting the wheelbarrow go. “Nice to see you.”

“And you.”

“Yeah, you probably want to know what my plans are, or whatever?”

“I wouldn’t mind. How’s your father been?”

“Good. My mother and he didn’t lose any time making up for lost time, they really do have something special.”

“How about his group?”

“Recovering. I think they’re getting a bit annoyed, they want to be on their way. He’s going to have to choose to stay or go, and he hasn’t made up his mind yet. I can see it both ways, but I’m sure he could do both with a little effort. I mean we go back and forth easily enough. I’ll support him whatever he decides to do, of course.”

“Glad to hear it. You?”

“Good. I’ve opened my own shop and started a ‘troubleshooting’ service for people just like I wanted.”

“Wizard people or normal people?”

“Wizards are normal people. But actually, both. The solution is of course whatever the person asking can accept. If a normal person is desperate enough to come to me and the solution requires magic, they get magic. If a wizard needs someone with super powers, they get someone with super powers. And if the wizard world doesn’t like it, tough. I’m not flaunting it or anything-”

“That’s a shock.”

She glared at him. “But I won’t pretend magic or my powers don’t exist when they do. And who knows, maybe rumor will grow into fact over the years and someday they won’t have to hide anymore. A girl can dream.”

“True. You’re dreaming now.”

“You know what I mean.”

“And is Luna enjoying her new position?”

“At the school? Very much. A few have already gotten a handle on calling out their advanced forms, and she’s working with hers to call out the ultimate. It’s a pretty exciting time to be a wizard.”

“Good, good.” He fell silent a moment. “So a shop? I guess that means you’re done *wandering*.”

“For now.”

“We still have to deal with your ‘twin’ don’t forget. And you still have Darkvoid inside, so you can’t really relax too much.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I won’t turn my back on the greater reality I know is out there. But I’m immortal, and Luna hasn’t decided yet. If she does or doesn’t, sooner or later I’m going to need a change of pace. Of scenery. You’ll get me back, and while I’m getting XP slower now I’m still having adventures in my own world. I’ll be better than ever.”

“Okay. That’s all I needed to hear. You’ve got my number.”

“I do.” She tapped her wrist. “You want the wings back in the meantime?”

He shook his head. “Keep them. They’re yours. Be happy, Susan. When you’re ready we’ll be here. Oh, you don’t mind me sending you the occasional person for consultations, do you? If someone wants an item made or something magical looked at?”

“Not at all! Just have them stop at the shop.”

“Very well, thanks. I’ll let you get back to then.”

“See you boss. Thanks, for everything.”

“Until then.”

He vanished, and Susan awoke. Then she snuggled closer to Luna and went back to sleep, content.