

Chapter 1  
Meeting a Green Haired Girl  
Where: ??  
When: ??

Lysanias found himself, sans marble, alone in a dark cave. He looked around, and it seemed to be an old mining tunnel if what he was seeing here was right.

"Hello?" he called, looking around. "Is anyone there?" *That's odd. Inari said I should always appear by the person or people nearest the heart of whatever avenue the shadow avatar will take with a world. Well, I don't have all these senses for nothing!* He didn't feel anything alive in the immediate area, but there was a way he could get the lay of the land. He slammed the nearby wall with this hand, feeling what the rock had to tell him.

*Couple of people above, fairly large cavern.* A rock hit him in the head and he looked up. *Wait, why can't I feel them if they're up there?* Another rock fell, then another. *How thick is the ceiling-*

He couldn't complete the thought as a young girl came crashing down from above, smacking into him and knocking him over in a tangle of limbs. He knew it was a girl because of various soft places he found himself touching as he flailed about with her weight on top of him.

"What in the world?" he managed. "Sorry, sorry, I'm trying to get up, but you're not helping."

"She fell!" a voice came ghosting down from above. "Don't let her escape. Get some rope! You two, head down that way and cover the entrance to the lower level. The witch must not escape!"

"Look, we better go," he managed, pushing the unresisting girl off him. "Sorry, you just surprised me- hello?" The girl rolled over and was still, obviously unconscious.

*Because that's what happens when you fall and smash into somebody. Is she hurt? She looked bruised, and her spiritual energy, what I can feel of it, feels really strange.* He looked up. *I feel a lot of hostility from that direction, if not people. I think until she can tell me what's going on, we should hide. Mountain Spirit?*

The spirit appeared, gently picking up the girl. *I'm really glad you can hear me better now. Which way should we go? People are coming who may be hostile.* The spirit looked around, but this was its domain, the mountain. It started off and Lysanias followed. They came to a mine-cart, and Lysanias nodded. *Yes, that'll do. We can make that work.* "I see what you mean. Set her down here," he directed, which the spirit did. He then used metal bending to flip the cart up and over, softly propping it over them. *And now the finishing touch.* He knew his wards by heart from the dispenser, and grabbed the ward that would make an object overlooked. Sticking it on he shifted his perceptions over to the spirit, hoping they couldn't see it. But it turned out they couldn't rushing past and fanning out, looking for the girl. They passed by both, unable to see the spirit and ignoring the now overturned minecart with the two people hiding under it.

With the threat gone for the moment Lysanias balanced a flame on his palm and looked the girl over. She was quite beautiful, with green hair, no jewelry, and torn up clothes. *Well, yes, she seems to have been through a lot. We'll just stay here until I'm sure those people have stopped looking. Perhaps in the meantime she'll wake up?*

With his spirit alert he watched in some amusement as people went up and down the cave, obviously looking for this girl he had rescued. But then a person not part of a group went by, looking quite confused. He was dressed totally different, in a vest, white shirt, and blue pants. *Where did this guy come from?* But he too went away empty handed, and finally the girl started to stir.

"Good morning," he said to her cheerfully. "Or good afternoon, or perhaps good evening. It's hard to tell in this cave."

"Yaaaaaaammmuuuu" she said by way of introducing herself. Getting a hand over her mouth as she yelled. She tried to struggle but they were wedged into the mine-cart and sandwiched together.

"Quiet, there may still be people looking for you out there!" he told her. He switched to

“spirit vision” a moment, but no one came running. “I mean they couldn’t see where we were anyway, but... I’m Lysanias, are you okay? You took quite a fall a little while ago, I saved you from whoever was after you. I’m moving my hand, okay?”

She nodded.

“There we go. All better. Now, I mean you no harm, okay? What’s your name?”

“What’s that?” She pointed to the flame.

“Thought you might not want to wake up in a mine-cart with a strange man in the dark, so I made us some light.”

“Right, because that’s the deciding factor,” she grouched. “Also, ow. My head hurts. I think I banged it again when I was trying to get away from you. Sorry about that, you surprised me. Who did you say I was?”

“I said I was Lysanias. I have no idea who you are.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Oh.”

“...I see this is going to be a very odd conversation.”

“I remember now! My name is Terra!”

“You really must have hit your head. Nice to meet you, Terra. Can you tell me who is chasing you? And do you know a man in a vest and a headband? He was wandering around out there a moment ago. I didn’t know who you wanted to trust after your little fall, so...”

She shook her head. “A man helped me, but he didn’t have a headband. He took off my slave crown. I don’t know anything more than that.”

“What, nothing?”

She sadly shook her head.

“Your entire memory is gone?”

She sadly nodded her head.

“Good thing you remember how to talk then, isn’t it? Well, this is a problem.”

“You’re telling me.”

“No, you don’t understand. Your world is in great danger, I was sent to warn you. But you- the world, not you, personally. I’ll need help saving your world.” *The help of one small, scared, beat up young woman apparently. Oh, and it isn’t lost on me that I’m now in a tiny box. My first world was a large metal box, my next one is a small metal box. Where will I find myself in the next world I visit? A coffin, perhaps? Inari does love her little pranks, doesn’t she? Te-he!*

“I wondered.”

“But if you don’t know what’s going on in this world, I don’t know who will believe me. Your world needs to prepare, I need to talk to people in charge, so they can be ready.”

“What’s that?” she pointed to the fire.

He stared at her, wondering just *how* hard she had hit her head. “It’s a magic fire so we can see each other,” he said.

And then found himself being grabbed by the shirt and pulled towards the face of this green haired girl. “You can do *magic*?” she demanded.

“Yeah, can you do magic? I thought you said you don’t remember anything.”

She let him go again. “You’re right. I remember I can do magic. In fact... Cure!” Magical energy swirled around her, and the wounds on her face vanished. “Oh, that’s much better!”

“Very nicely done,” Lysanias had to admit. “You can do magic all right. In fact, maybe that’s why those people were after you? I heard the word ‘witch’ mentioned.”

“I have no idea.”

“Great!” The two stared at each other a moment.

“What’s the matter, never seen a girl before?” she joked.

“What do you want me to look at, the scenery?”

“Where are we, anyway?”

“An overturned mine-cart. Seemed a good place to hide and blend in.”

“Clever. But what are we going to do?”

“That’s an excellent question.”

So the pair waited for some time, until the spirit knocked on the side of the cart.

"What was that?" Terra asked.

"I set my spirit to watch over us, I think it's telling us it's all clear."

"Your spirit?"

"Yeah, look, once we're more secure I can give you the whole story. For now, whatever I do you'll just have to chalk up to magic, okay? I can do a lot, and hopefully teach and learn from the people here. But this isn't really the setting."

"I'm indebted to you," Terra decided. "If you can keep me safe I'll follow where you lead. And hear your story later. But for now, okay. We magic users have to stick together, right?"

"I appreciate that, and you're right." *But is she being hunted for her magic? Who can we trust around here if she has no memories? And if magic is illegal or something around here, that's going to make it very difficult to use my abilities to help these people. It's going to be-* "Wait, before we go, I should change what you look like!"

"Do what?"

"Look, people around here are going to be on the lookout for a young woman with green hair that looks like you. I can change your appearance to not be that woman. Then people will just walk past you."

"I've never heard of magic like that!"

"It's- *not exactly magic.* "Complicated. Do you mind?" He held out a hand almost touching her face.

"No, but it's not permanent, is it? Just in case we get separated."

"Wears off in a few hours."

"Go ahead."

So he changed her into a woman he knew well, Korra, and then metal bent the minecart off them. Terra seemed impressed as he gently lowered it back to the track, and looked his spirit over.

"Terra, or Korra as I'll now call you in case anyone recognizes the name, meet my mountain spirit. Mountain spirit, this is Terra."

It bowed.

"It doesn't speak."

"Ah!" She bowed back.

"You know the way out?" he asked. It nodded. "Great. Lead on."

"Wait," Terra cautioned him. "A place like this will be thick with random encounters. I don't suppose you have an extra sword I can use? And shouldn't you put your armor on, if you have any?"

"Thick with the what now?"

"Random encounters." She looked at him like he was from another planet, which to be fair he was. "You know, stabbing the monsters so they lose HP and then die from it?"

"I don't see anything," he said, looking around.

"Well, you wouldn't until you ran into them," she explained. "Do you have an extra sword or not?"

"I have *my* sword, but you can borrow it," he figured. "My shield has a sharpened edge if I needed to use it as a weapon. But I can attack a lot of different ways. I still have no idea what you're talking about though."

"I thought I was the one who lost my memory? Random encounters! How do you think we get XP? In fact, if you are a decent fighter and can protect me I should probably raise a few levels while we're here. The three goddesses know I'll need them before this is over."

"Levels. Right. Are you sure about all this, Miss I-Lost-My-Memory?"

"I wouldn't forget about that, it's like putting clothes on or breathing. You go anywhere, you expect to get attacked by stuff."

"I'll take your word for it." Lysanias handed over his sword, which he got out of the ward at his arm. He got out his shield as well, just in case she wasn't being crazy. He rooted around in his chest for the ward that held his armor and suppressing a sigh put it on. *I'll have to strengthen this when I get a chance. I'll want it to last a long, long time.* He snorted. *Am I going to be a walking collection of memories in twenty or thirty years? Each piece of gear*

*reminding me of face, a name, the person who gave it to me? I guess I should just hope to live that long.*

"That's better," Terra told him, looking him over. "Now you're a knight saving a young girl in distress and not just a hobo that wandered into the cave."

"That's what I feel- Where's the sword?" he asked her, as she wasn't holding it. "I did hand you a sword, right? That was a thing I did?" He checked and yes, both wards were gone.

"Uh, I equipped it, of course. It won't be needed until we're in a fight."

"Right." *Well, she couldn't have eaten it, or hidden it, she was standing right there.*

"With no armor of my own yet I'll keep to the back row and support you," she decided. "I hope you can finish stuff around here in one shot so I don't get too beat up. My MP won't last forever."

"I think we're both going to have some incredible stories to tell each other," Lysanias decided.

The two set off.

It wasn't twenty steps down the path towards the exit when something around Lysanias *changed*, though he couldn't have put his finger on what. But there were two giant rats with insanely big mouths and teeth before them.

"Where did they come from?" he asked in shock, noticing she was holding the sword now.

"I don't know, where does any random monster come from?"

"Uhhh," he managed, looking back at the rats. They eyed him with malice, and seemed to be waiting for something. In fact it almost seemed like the universe was waiting for him, expecting him to do something. "Why don't they attack?"

"It's your turn, dummy. Goddess help me I've been rescued by an idiot. How did you even get here without running into at least one random encounter?"

He struggled to answer this question in a way that wouldn't take half an hour. "Magic?"

She rolled her eyes. "I see. Just go already."

"Okay." He approached the rat and whacked it with the shield, then was compelled to walk back to where he had been. He shook his head, wondering what had just happened.

"Great, you did eight damage. Are you sure *you* aren't in the back row?"

The rat he had hit now came over to him, and made to bite him. He blocked it with his shield, and the rat went pinging off and went back into place.

"At least you're decent at blocking. My turn!" She flew forward, smacking it with the sword and making it vanish. Suddenly she was back in position again. "That's how you do it. This is actually a decent sword, even if I can't see the stats on it for some reason. Well, go ahead, see if your spirit can finish it off this turn."

*Okay, this little girl is obviously far stronger than me, or something else is going on here. Let's try this... spirit, use fire bending.* His spirit directed a stream of fire at it, and he somehow knew, now that he was concentrating on it, that his spirit had done far more damage to the rat than his "eight" from before. How much more, exactly, he couldn't be sure. It too vanished.

"Nice, that worked! They must be weak to fire," Terra told him, doing a funny dance and making the sword disappear again. Then there was that *shifting* again and Terra was looking at him. "Now do you believe me? Random. Encounter."

"I guess I have to. But how did you kill that rat in one shot when I couldn't?"

"I did more damage to it. A lot more, from what I could see. How are you still alive, doing only eight damage to something? I could attack bare handed and do more."

"I was always fairly weak," he complained.

"I should say so. Your magic seems top notch though. How much MP do you have? Enough to last until we get out of here? I have twenty nine, by the way."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"How can you not know what MP is? You did magic just now, I saw you."

"That uses spiritual energy."

"Now you're talking nonsense."

"I suppose I am. Can we get on with it?"  
"Of course."

Terra and Lysanias walked the interior of the mountain, fighting off monsters with regularity. He was forced to use bending, which he was worried would tire him out, but for some strange reason didn't seem to be. It was a good thing, as once Terra saw he could be just as effective in combat as she could she insisted on wandering in a circle and getting "XP" which she said would allow her to "level up." Lysanias just shook his head and accepted it. Using bending and his spirit they could take just about anything they met in this cave in one action, so they weren't in any real danger. Some time passed, and she said she wasn't getting much benefit out of this anymore and they should find the exit.

*Finally. This is giving me the creeps.*

The spirit led him to what seemed to be a dead end, but it went over and hit a switch, opening a secret door that led outside. Fresh air streamed in, and the sunshine felt great on Lysanias' face.

"Ah, finally out of the cave," Terra remarked, stretching her hands over her head. "I leveled up some, and made a new friend."

Lysania's spirit vanished, there seemed to be no reason to keep it around now, and he looked around. It was a fairly mountainous area, with a path leading off to the left. "Shall we?"

"Looks like we have no choice. I hope this disguise of yours works."

"Don't worry, it will."

The path wasn't that long, and a town came into view. And what a town it was! Lysanias stood staring at it, houses built into the mountainside. There seemed to be steam engines everywhere, and odd mechanical devices whirring beside houses with a purpose he could only guess at. "Maybe we can find a place to talk," he suggested, gesturing towards the town.

"Now is a good a time as any to see if this new look of mine works." They strode up the main street, coming almost immediately to an inn to their right. No one stopped them or shouted out, so they went in. The building was fairly small, in fact there were only two rooms. Terra walked up to the counter and paid 200 GP, which she wasn't sure was high or low, and they went into the other room through a door to the left of the counter. It was fairly simple, with a fireplace, table, and four beds just kind of sitting there. Nowhere to change, no walls, just some oil lamps on the walls, a nice carpet in the center, and four beds.

"What if they get more than four people?" Lysanias wondered aloud.

"It's probably a remote area? I don't know." She went over and sat at the table. "Now, talk. Who are you, who am I, and what's going on that I can't remember anything?"

Chapter 2  
Getting up to Speed  
When: Immediately after  
Where: Inn table with Terra

"I'm afraid I can only tell you some of that," Lysanias sadly told Terra. "I can tell you all about me and why I'm here. I could even give you a glimpse into what you were doing before I arrived. But who you are? I have no idea."

She sighed. "I guess I'll have to take what I can get. So, who are you?"

Lysanias repeated the tale he told Korra and Lin, about who he was and what he was doing there. Terra responded during this story with outright incredulity, thoughtful silences, and scowling. Mostly scowling. At the end she got up and looked at herself in the mirror.

"I can't deny you did this, or that other stuff you've showed me. At least I don't recall looking like this." She started pacing the room. "But you're saying I'm at the middle of what could wipe us all out? And the thing that wants to do that is a being that works through possession and has taken someone here over?"

"Exactly. Probably someone powerful, or at least someone they can influence to cause destruction on a massive scale."

"But what am I supposed to do about it? I don't even know who I am!"

"It depends on what the threat is. If it's some sort of magic user like yourself I suppose you'll have to fight them."

"Me?"

"Not alone, of course. You'll have me at the least-"

"Great, the person that does eight damage in combat. I'm full of confidence now."

He scowled at her and went on, "Plus any other people we can convince and get to help. I'm sure a few people might not want to see their world blown up or whatever?"

"If you can convince them. I have no idea what's true and what's not, and you've hardly convinced me."

"Fine. Come over here and take my hand." He held his out.

She sighed and did as he asked, allowing him to peek into her recent past.

"Humm, well that can't be good."

"What?"

"You've been busy today. Apparently you walked here in some kind of mechanical beast with two others." *Not unlike the mechanical war machines back on Korra's world. These actually walked, they didn't roll on treads, but the design is quite similar. Maybe the shadow avatar is influencing designs, though I thought I got a no when I asked that. Come to think of it I still have those two I captured, I never did give them back. Too late now. Whoops. Wonder which would win in a fight?*

"I vaguely recall that."

"You then smashed through the town, and I'm afraid to report you and your two companions killed a bunch of people."

"Oh no!" She sank into the chair, horror written plain on her face. "How... How many?"

"Half a dozen? I'm sorry."

She stared at her hands. "What have I done?"

"What you were told to do, actually. Whatever those two men told you to do, you did it. Didn't even question it. They didn't seem too broken up about what they were doing, just that it was something that had to be done. Like cutting back a plant that's grown too far."

She winced and held her head, breathing heavily. "That crown thing that guy took off. Called it a slave crown, said I would do anything while wearing it."

"He was right, I think. Don't blame yourself for those deaths, you were unable to stop yourself." *Or you're a murder machine that's going to go nuts and stab me in the*

*back, with my own sword (again) while I sleep. At least it won't be on fire this time?*

"I was a weapon in someone else's hand," she muttered softly. "Still..." She sat quietly for a moment, and Lysanias let her be. Finally she raised her head again. "What happened next?"

"You took out some weird looking creature with a shell, then moved into the mines. From there you went straight to a thing trapped in ice. Some kind of spirit, I would have called it. It reacted, apparently it's still alive in there, or at least aware on some level."

"Reacted how?"

"Your two companions vanished. Machines and all, I have no idea what it did to them. Then it started to glow, and you did. You must have blacked out because I see you being carried out, then waking up in the house of that guy who took that thing off your head. The rest you know."

"I escaped into the tunnels, and met you."

"That's right. Fell on top of me, to be specific."

"And you think this Inari person put you there to catch me?"

"And as a joke. She would think it was hilarious to watch me standing there and someone crashes down on top of me."

"Yes, actually being there to help me *before* I crashed through the floor would have been helpful."

"But that may have required killing those people that were after you. This got us together and got you away from them. Isn't that better?"

"Humph. Well, fine. I vaguely remember something like that, so I guess you've proven yourself once again. Unless you were somehow watching all that from somewhere? But that's doubtful. I guess for now I'll just have to trust you."

"I wish I could offer a better token of my sincerity."

"I wish a lot of things," she muttered. "Look, this has all been a lot to process, do you mind if I get some sleep? I'm exhausted."

"All the running around you've been doing today? I don't blame you. Sure. It's mid-morning for me, but I can do some things from here."

"That's fine." She stood, walked over to a bed and started pulling her clothes off. Lysanias colored and looked away, listening to her sliding under the covers.

*Do they have different social conventions here? Or has she just forgotten to care? Have to remember to refresh her transformation if I decide to take a nap. Don't want anyone wandering in and seeing a green haired girl, now do I? Especially after all the damage she caused, unknowingly or not. This device that controls people, does it have to be over the head? How can I trust anyone if they could be under someone else's control?*

As Terra tried to get some sleep Lysanias sat on his bed and called out his mountain spirit. *Let's do a little exploring, shall we? This town didn't seem too large, I bet we could see a large chunk of it right from here.*

While Lysanias couldn't drive the spirit around like a vehicle it knew what he wanted, and walked around the town totally unseen. He could see just about all of it, and watched as people went about their daily lives. They talked, they tinkered with the heaters outside their homes, they shopped at the stores in town. At least, Lysanias figured they were heaters. They had fire inside them, and smoke or steam was coming out, and there was a pipe to the inside of the house. It was somewhat odd to him to waste the heat, why not just put the unit on the inside and then pipe out the gases you didn't want? *But what do I know?* No one evidenced any kind of magical, supernatural, or simply super power. No one noticed his spirit, and there seemed to be some kind of service going on for the fallen defenders of the town. The spirit stood a moment, Lysanias not knowing what was really appropriate as a gesture of respect. *Do these people have a Heaven like we do? Is their God an angry one like ours, did He destroy their world at some point? Where do they go when they die, if they go anywhere? Are*

*there ghosts here? I don't see any elves or dwarves or beast kin. Just people. There's no telling those sorts aren't elsewhere though. Wow, this is turning out to be very different from my last world. I met Korra and events started playing out. I didn't have a lot of time to explore like this. Of course, their city was much bigger, and my spirit wouldn't have been able to go as far or get anywhere, given benders could see it. He shook his head. How long has it been for your world, Korra? Seconds? Years? Are you okay? Have you passed my teachings down?*

After he was satisfied he had poked into enough of the town to not make any huge mistakes interacting with people here he released his spirit with a word of thanks and stood up. Careful not to wake Terra he got out his trunk and looked over his ward collection. He absorbed the energy from any that looked rough, and redid them just to save the paper. He was pleased to see the writing vanish and then take again, and he was far happier with the replacements. He made sure to stock his dispenser, then looked over and made some notes in his journal about what he had seen on this world so far. He clarified some things from his practice in the last few months, and snapped that book closed. Then he looked over the book of talisman making he had gotten to see what he might have to do with his armor to make it a bit more durable. *Should have worked on it before, but I didn't figure on actually wearing it all that much. I figured I could just chi-block anything that attacked me. More fool me, who knew I would be fighting off monsters on the very next world I went to? Where people carry weapons and wear armor as a matter of course just to step outside of town. Crazy!* He made food with his magic, and found the small bathroom off the one wall so that wasn't a concern. Toilets looked almost exactly the same as in Korra's world, making him suspicious but unsure what exactly to be suspicious about.

It was getting dark by this time but Terra hadn't stirred. He didn't want to disturb her with any loud practicing of anything so he did a few last things before turning in himself. He refreshed her transformation by undoing it, and then redoing it again so it would last the night. Then he settled himself on the bed and carefully released his senses from his body, intending to go straight up and then straight back down so he didn't get lost. He could only stay this way a very short time compared to Jinora, and given his location he didn't want to get lost. He rose through the roof of the place and kept going until he could get a bird's eye view of the surrounding country, then hurried back to his body. With that done he stripped off some of his clothes and got to sleep himself.

It seemed only a moment later he was being awoken by someone in the room, and wondered if it was Terra. It wasn't, it was the innkeeper, walking away from the table.

"Morning!" he chirped. "Complimentary breakfast and newspaper on the table. Enjoy your day."

"Thanks," Lysanias managed, sitting up. The man left, and Terra opened her eyes as well.

"Good morning," he said to her.

"Morning."

"How do you feel?"

"Better. A little, I guess. My head doesn't hurt, but I still don't think I remember anything. I certainly can't remember needing to pee more than I do now."

"Bathroom is over there," he told her, pointing.

"Great, thanks." She grabbed her clothes and went over there, shutting the door. Lysanias simply put his stuff back on, cast his daily spell to clean himself, and grabbed the paper. *This could prove very valuable.*

Moments later the door opened and a refreshed Terra came bounding out. "Ah breakfast!" she moaned, looking at the food like she wanted it all the way inside her. "I

can't remember a time I was hungrier."

Lysanias groaned. "That's going to be a running gag with you, isn't it?"

"What is?" she asked innocently, grabbing some kind of bready thing and taking a bite. "Anything good in the paper, dear?" She giggled. "It's like we're married!"

"How do you know you're not already married?"

That brought her up short, food halfway to her mouth. "I have no idea! I could be, couldn't I?"

"Well, better hold off making any wedding plans for us, then. As for the paper, not much good. There's accounts of your rampage through town trying to steal what they call an Esper for what they call the empire. Says here you got away by what they call vanishing into thin air, and that the Esper is being moved to another location that can be what they call better defended."

"I see," she replied glumly, staring at her half eaten food as if she wasn't as hungry anymore. But she shrugged and started finishing it.

"Apparently this act of barbarism by the empire is swinging opinion away from them and towards some terrorist group calling themselves 'the returners.' Not sure what they're returning, maybe they just want to make sure people bring their library books back on time?"

That got a small smile out of her. *Ah, so they have libraries, good to know. Or she's just too polite to ask me what the heck I mean and is humoring me.*

"The town had been neutral until yesterday. Otherwise, just local stuff, speculation around the Esper and what finding it means for the world. That sort of thing. Trouble is everyone around here knows what an Esper is, so short of what I saw in your past I have no idea. Some kind of magical creature, maybe? That's why the reaction to you? I didn't see any other magic being used around town."

"I see."

He put the paper down and started to dig into breakfast himself.

Terra looked the paper over, scowling at it. "Do you know," she finally said, "I can't read a word of this."

"What? You've forgotten how to read?"

"Apparently. I have no idea if you just made all that up, or what. I mean I see the drawing of what must be my machine stomping through town with the two others, but the rest is just squiggly lines."

"You can talk perfectly well though..." He trailed off.

"What?"

"You haven't spoken to anyone but me since I arrived, have you?"

"No."

"So it may be my ability to understand any language that's helping. Maybe they use a different one here, and that's why you can't read this one. Who knows from how far away you come from."

"I guess. It's just odd I remember how to use magic, and tie my shoes and stuff, but I can't read. It doesn't make sense."

*Wait, if she was enslaved by the empire like she claims, maybe it was from a very young age. Maybe no one ever taught her?*

"It seems to me," she said, taking a look at the front page, "that if this 'the empire' was willing to basically enslave me (probably for my magic),"

*Is she reading my mind?*

"...and send a bunch of heavily armed and armored troops to this town, they're the bad guys. You said yesterday the three of us basically bowled the town over, right?"

"Yeah, they didn't stand a chance. And an empire probably has an emperor, our first suspect for the identity of the shadow avatar."

"I could see that. But what do we do about it?"

"Do you think there are other magical people enslaved by this empire? Or might some be free and part of this 'returners' group? We could seek them out, see what they

had to say about things. See how they operate, that sort of thing. I mean they could be worse than the empire, we don't know."

"No, we don't," she replied sadly. "As for other magic users, I don't know. I think about others and I just feel very, very much alone."

"Hey, you've got me! We'll figure this out, trust me." He squeezed her hand.

"I have no choice but to trust you for the moment."

"That's true, I guess. But it's a start. I could find their nearest base and we could head there. Or we could travel to other towns and see what the sentiment there is about the emperor. I suppose we'll have more 'random encounters' between here and wherever we go?" She nodded. "Then we won't hurt for money. As monsters seem to carry it here, for some reason. Is there a monster economy? It doesn't make sense."

"Don't look at me. And believe me, we'll need the XP, I still feel under leveled for whatever's coming."

*I guess just flying around is out.* "Any case, it's up to you. I've probably already changed your destiny, rescuing you like I did. Whatever you're up for, I'll go along with for now. Even staying here another day so you can recover more."

She shook her head. "No, I think I need to get moving. See if you can find these returners and we'll see what they have to say."

"Okay."

As Lysanias knew they couldn't go in certain directions because of the mountains, he sat down to ask the universe how far to go to reach the nearest returner base in the directions they could go. He was shocked to get back numbers that seemed far too low to be believed. "This base is practically on this town's doorstep," he told Terra. "Let's see if there's a map anywhere around here, and get going. Unless there's something else you want to do around town?"

"The town where I mercilessly killed a bunch of people? Sure, let's go shopping!"

"If you want."

"I was not being serious, but I suppose we should look into prices here, just in case."

So the two went back to the front desk and asked about a map, which the man helpfully produced so they could look it over. From what Lysanias could tell there was a break in the mountain range to the south east where the hideout was. But he didn't see any way through the mountains.

"How would we get here?" he asked the man, tapping on the map.

"Have to go through this cave here," he replied. "Then come out here, and go through this cave here. Why?"

"That's a fair question," he answered, stalling for time. "Heard rumors of some treasure in those mountains, thought that might be a good place to start looking."

"It's your funeral."

"That it is. Thanks for the hospitality."

"Stay with us again some time."

The pair then looked the shops over, there seemed to be a weapon shop and an armor shop, so she went to the armor one first. She picked up some iron armor for 700 gold, which made Lysanias' eyes bulge out of his head. He didn't realize they had made even that much, or why just a plate of hammered metal would cost that much. Over in the weapon store she bought a sword for 800, and said that was about it for their finances. Then she did something surprising.

"How much would you give me for this sword?" she asked, handing it over to the guy running the weapon shop.

"Hey, you can't just sell my sword!" Lysanias protested.

"I'm not, I'm just asking what it's worth. Well?"

"Not sure," said the man, looking it over. "Not a design I'm familiar with. Is it even

a sword? I can't seem to tell what the stats of it are."

"That's what I was afraid of," she lamented, taking it back. "It isn't just me then. Thanks."

"Sure. I could give you a few gold just as a curiosity if you really wanted to part with it."

"I'm going to see which one is better in combat, but I'll keep it in mind," she told him. "See you later."

"Have a nice day."

"So where are we headed? All the way through all those caves?" Terra asked as they left town.

"I suppose if you want to travel for weeks at a time. I was thinking we head due south, the only real direction we can go in, until we see that desert. Then we hop into my balloon and fly over the mountain range to the other side. I'll get another reading on where the base is from there, but it should be close."

"And you're sure it's in that middle part?"

"Hardly any distance east and a bit south, where else could it be? You saw the map."

"I can't remember another time I saw one."

He eyed her and she looked innocent. *At least she's in good humor about the whole thing. Would I be that casual about losing my memory?* "Be that as it may, yes, I'm fairly sure."

"Then I guess we better go."

It wasn't two steps outside the town they ran into their first random encounter. Lysanias sighed. *It's going to be a long walk.*

Chapter 3  
Two Steps Behind  
When: Day 2  
Where: Out in the fields

As Lysanias walked and battled he was able to come to several conclusions. Some of them quite disturbing. One which was quite fortunate. This was the fact that Terra said his fire bending was comparable in strength to her “fire 1” magic, when cast against a single enemy. (She could split the damage across multiple enemies if she wanted.) This worked out because he still did pathetic amounts of damage while hitting stuff with either the sword or the shield. It wasn’t the equipment itself, he tried both swords and still got very little damage, while Terra got just about the same amount attacking with his shield. They traded back. He did make her a crude shield of her own though, as the one back at town was 1,200 gold, raising some rock out of the ground and shaping it, then turning it into metal. Again she said she couldn’t tell any “stats” on it, but it seemed to work for her knocking aside things that were trying to hurt her.

So he stuck to bending; earth, air or fire didn’t seem to matter, each did roughly the same amount unless the creature they were facing was weak to one or the other. He figured this would tire him out in short order, but as before it didn’t seem to, making him come to the disturbing realization out in the field.

*There were no ley lines in the world.*

Not one. He could feel no life energy of any kind, anywhere, which initially made him worried because he wouldn’t be able to recharge himself. But as the day wore on and he made attack after attack, an idea came to his mind. Terra, when she did magic, lost MP. Whatever it was she had it and he didn’t. And she had only a finite amount of it at any one time. He could feel it, doing a magic sense on her before and after a spell left her slightly less magical. She said sleeping or drinking certain types of potions could replenish her, and she always seemed to know the absolute amount of MP left to her. Each spell took a set amount, and when it was gone she said no more magic for her. But in his case, it seemed like he no longer had energy.

*Or to be more accurate, I have the amount of energy I need to perform a certain task, and that’s it. Like this universe has no equivalent to what I’m doing and so just shrugs and lets me get away with it. I’m not “running out” because I don’t have anything to run out of.*

It was also disturbing where these monsters were coming from. He tried glimpsing the future to try going around them, sensing energy and magic, nothing worked. It just seemed that every step they took there was a chance for monsters to come out of nowhere and try to kill them. Killing dozens didn’t make the next ones back off, they just kept coming, and they all attacked in the same way (for their species) and in similar numbers. Lysanias even thought they could be the *same* creatures somehow, being killed again and again.

*And the way they vanish... where are they going? Do they not exist until we encounter them? Do they just exist as potential and we’re giving them form by walking into certain energy fields I can’t sense? And then they return to that state? But then where does the money come from? And one dropped a potion, why would a creature have a potion? This is so messed up.*

The last somewhat distressing thing was that Terra’s “cure” spell didn’t seem to do anything for him. She explained it as replenishing “HP” so basically trading MP for HP in some way. “But as you don’t have MP you must not have HP either. So that stands to reason.” He had multiple ways of healing himself, so it was fine, just another difference between them. He didn’t seem to take as much damage as she did, so it seemed his not dealing damage was balanced out, but he had to be careful because

only he could heal himself, Terra couldn't. He gave her some wards though, as she could activate them, in case he got into a bad situation. She put these into her "inventory" which he figured was like the weapon being "equipped." It would be there when she needed it, in other words.

There was one other interesting thing he learned, relating to his spirit. If out and walking beside him the spirit was brought into their battles and could act normally for the whole fight. However, if he tried to get it out after the battle began it would come out, perform an action, and then vanish again. *And that was it.* He couldn't get it to come out again, and when he sat and meditated to ask the spirit directly, they said they only heard the first call and no others. He went back and forth several times trying to figure out why this was happening, but no answers came to him. So he just left it out.

Walking along with Terra was pleasant, despite all the monster attacks. The weather was nice enough, and she seemed to be good company. Apart from her catchphrase, that is; "I can't remember a taller mountain!" "I don't think I remember a bluer sky." "I can't remember being that close to dying, good thing I got my cure spell off." The field was level so it wasn't like they were having to slog through mud or sneak through enemy territory. They just walked and slaughtered things that popped up out of nowhere.

That night they camped out under a stone structure Lysanias made, tending a fire and looking up at the stars. Very different stars than Lysanias was used to, either on his home world or Korra's world. It seemed as long as they weren't going anywhere monsters wouldn't attack, so the night passed easily enough without them setting a watch. Of course, the "ignore me" wards plastered onto the sides of the stone structure may have helped in some way. Lysanias wasn't about to take chances, he had learned that from Don.

It was now the next day and getting dark as the pair followed the mountain spirit who unerringly led them towards the base now that they were closer. The balloon worked just fine here, lifting them easily over the mountains and for the moment granting a reprieve from the endless "random encounters" they had slogged through all day. Even Terra seemed a bit annoyed with them.

"I can't remember there being that many before," she offered, almost sounding apologetic. As if the monsters they ran into were her fault somehow.

"Really?" he asked sarcastically, then realizing maybe she was sounding apologetic for using that phrase again.

"I'm serious this time. I have a vague recollection of walking around before this, doing stuff for the empire. Being forced to do stuff for the empire, I should say. But lately it's more and more monsters. I don't know."

"I suppose it could be the shadow avatar somehow. Keep supply lines from functioning by crowding them with monsters."

"That would be fine. When we defeat it, the levels should go back to normal. I just hope it isn't something we're doing."

He indicated the both of them. "Us two, or everyone in your world in general?"

"Either, I guess."

"You mean we could be *attracting* them somehow?"

"I don't know!"

"Well, we seem to be doing all right, and your levels are rising. You started at level 4 right? And you say your 'XP' totals are climbing far faster than you would have guessed, because you're not splitting whatever 'XP' is with me. Despite my being there to help in combat, so what's in it for me, I'd like to know." *And again, how can you put such absolute numbers on all that?*

"Keeping me safe so you have someone to talk to as we walk?" she asked slyly.

"And a fine goal that is, too. Wouldn't change it for the world!" he hastily assured her.

"That's right, you better believe it."

"So you're getting stronger. If they start to overwhelm us we can just take off in the balloon, we've proven they aren't in the air. And they only come in small groups."

"Imagine if they all just waited, and jumped us all at once at the end of the day!" She shuddered. "We wouldn't stand a chance no matter how weak they were."

"So either whatever is directing them doesn't think like that, or there is no direction to it. Nothing we can do about it in either case, if you want to keep getting stronger."

"I guess. Just the constant battles got on my nerves a little."

"And I bet you can't remember a time something did that!"

She shook her head. "Too soon."

"But... But..."

She just turned away before he saw her smiling.

The pair carefully made their way to the entrance of the hideout, having lowered the balloon and put it away some distance from the cave they were now looking at. It was fairly unremarkable, which now that Lysanias thought about it was the entire point of a secret hideout for essentially a terrorist organization. You wouldn't put out a sign, now would you? He noted two rather large stones sitting there and thought he could put them to good use.

"Shall we go in?" Terra asked him.

"I figure we should, this is where my spirit says we need to go. I don't see anyone on those ridges there, and I can block off the entrance once we go inside so we won't get attacked from the rear."

"Sounds reasonable. Does it seem a little, I don't know, quiet around here?" She looked around. "I know it's a secret base and everything, but you think we would have seen a sentry or something as we got closer."

"Just keep alert for any traps once we get inside. The actual base itself could be miles away, deep in a maze crawling with monsters to keep out those that don't know the safe path through."

"You could be right."

So the two entered, and Lysanias use earth bending to grab the rocks and drop them in front of the door, effectively sealing it up. They turned, expecting to see some kind of impediment to easy process. But no, there was a short wooden bridge that crossed a minor drop, and there was the base. No maze, no guards, no activity of any kind. There was a torch burning directly to their left, making Lysanias wonder who they got to maintain it way over there at the deepest part of the cave they had seen so far, and straight ahead were some boxes. The two shrugged in confusion and called out, but got no answer.

The main portion of the cave was naturally cut into three sections; directly across from the entrance was a storage area with a smaller table and chair. To the right was an eating area, or what would have been one, had it not been completely trashed, and past that going north was a carpeted area with another table and some bookshelves. This area was also totally trashed, books strewn everywhere, the table overturned, contents of boxes thrown everywhere.

"What happened here?" Terra asked softly, as if not daring to speak aloud for fear of causing some greater catastrophe.

"I'll tell you when I get a chance to look at the past of this place," Lysanias promised her. "For now let's keep looking. There were some doors..."

Heading due south they came to an area with beds, or again what would have been beds had they not been overturned and torn up.

"Four beds," Lysanias remarked. "What, were there only four people here at any one time?"

"Maybe they were all just very friendly with each other?" Terra suggested with a raised eyebrow. "I certainly don't remember seeing a greater number of beds in one place."

"That checks out then."

"I admit it is sort of odd. Maybe they get sold in packs of four, I don't know. Let's keep looking."

The only other door was off the main hallway, it led to a small chamber with a single bed in it. This too was thrown over and torn up.

"Ah, see, here's a single bed!" Terra exclaimed, looking the room over. "Who was the lucky person who got to sleep alone?"

"Or maybe unlucky?"

She gasped. "Maybe this is some sort of punishment chamber? You were bad so go sleep in the closet?"

"Alternatively," he offered with a finger tapping his nose, "it was for people who wanted to, as you might say, enjoy each other's company without others watching?"

"Oh!" She grinned and colored. "You think?"

"I mean if you really want to know..." He held out a hand, about to walk over and touch the bed.

"It's fine," she went around him and started pushing him out of the room. "Let's keep looking."

But they didn't find much. They straightened the place up and Lysanias longingly flipped through the books, thinking of Everest. *If this place stays empty like this, I may be back here to 'borrow' some of these to take back to him. Amy was nice enough to find me some books I could take, I hope to bring back a writing sample for every reality I visit. He would totally flip out over them.*

The place was clearly abandoned, and whoever had trashed it must not have known what they were looking for, or had found it at the very end and taken it. There were some nice maps the pair helped themselves to, along with any unbroken potions, and some odd looking things like feathers Terra insisted they take. They were pretty, a shimmering orange color, but Lysanias couldn't figure out why she would want them.

"It's your inventory," he told her.

"That's right, it is," she agreed.

With that done he could put it off no longer, and opened himself up to the impressions of the past. He was hesitant because all this damage could have been from fighting, and he was about to see a bunch of people get murdered. He had no idea if people vanished like those monsters when they died, or if they left bodies behind. He had no idea why one type of being would do one thing and another a different thing but he didn't want to assume. He shouldn't have worried. All he could tell was that several hours ago there had been a meeting, everyone here had left from this room, and an hour after that the empire stormed the place and tore through it. Then they left as well.

"So no one was killed?" Terra asked again.

"This place was clearly abandoned for some time before the other soldiers arrived," Lysanias assured her with a shake of his head. "I think they got away clean."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Good question. We have no idea what secondary hideout they may have, and it's too late to go anywhere tonight. We'll fix up two of the beds... I'll fix up two of the beds, and we can spend the night here. In the morning we'll figure out our next move. I can always ask where the majority of people from here went, see if it's not too far away."

"Nothing else for it, I guess."

"You want the bed in the other room?"

"Oh. Um, actually, probably not. Quite apart from sleeping where someone else may have, you know, we shouldn't be too separated, in case something happens."

"Up to you."

So Lysanias made what repairs he could to the frames and mattresses for two of the beds, and made them some food and water for the night. It was a little tougher than usual as he was maintaining a flame in the center of the room with fire bending while he did this. Oddly there were no torches in this room, and they hadn't found any that weren't bolted onto the walls to carry in here. But he managed it. They ate in silence in the other room, then went down to the sleeping area. Again she just sort of tossed most of her clothes off so he followed suit as she stood there next to her bed. Terra surprised him by suddenly pushing her bed fairly close to his and getting into it.

"Good night," she said, as he winked the flame out again.

"Good night." He got into bed and stared at the ceiling. At least he figured it was still there, as it was now pitch black in this room.

"Lysanias?" asked Terra.

"Hmm?"

"What's going to happen to me?" she asked softly. He felt a hand cross the space between the beds and he took it.

"We are going to find where you belong in this world," he promised her. "Then we're going to find some allies and friends, and keep your world safe from the shadow avatar."

"As simple as that, huh?"

"That's right."

"You'll think I'm being silly... Just a stupid girl who can't even remember her past. What good am I?"

"What? No I won't. Whatever you think, Terra, I promise that is not how I see you. You are obviously far stronger than me on this world, if battle damage is any indication. But that's not what you mean, is it? Come on, tell me."

"I just feel so alone."

"That's because you're in a cave, alone with some guy you just met two days ago. For all I know we're the only two people left in the whole world."

"Don't say that!"

He chuckled. "I'm just kidding. I think we would have noticed the end of the world."

"You don't know," she replied sullenly.

"If we are, I'll just find you a new world to live in."

"My own world. That would be nice, wouldn't it?"

"Where you can walk around outside all you want and not get attacked by stuff-"

"Wait, let's not go overboard here!" she admonished.

"Okay, an encounter rate half what it is here. Is that better?"

"Much."

"The weather is always nice, and there's a beautiful lake to swim in, and bright stars overhead at night."

"I'd like that. I guess I'm not alone, huh? Thanks, you know, for being here. Hey, can I, um, hold your hand... until I fall asleep?"

"Of course. You aren't alone, Terra. Tomorrow, we'll find some more help, people from this world who can start filling in the gaps in your memory. You'll see."

"Okay. I trust you. Thanks. I feel a little better. Good dreams."

"You too."

Again it seemed Lysanias spent no time asleep, waking up refreshed at the same time Terra did. He created a flame somewhat above him, illuminating her, and she blinked against the sudden light.

"Morning," she greeted him.

"Good morning. If it is morning, hard to tell in this cave. Sleep well?"

"Fairly well. I suppose we'll have to get up, huh?"

"I don't think we'll be able to save the world from here. Would be nice though, wouldn't it? How are you feeling?"

"Since you offered to solve all my problems for me? Much better. Get on that, would you?"

He laughed. "Your wish is my command."

They both got out of bed and started getting dressed, Terra picking up her shirt and sniffing it. "I can't remember when this was last washed," she remarked. "And I bet there's no shower in this cave, is there?"

"We didn't find one. Just the, uh, "toilet" over in the far corner."

"The hole in the floor you mean?"

"That's the one. Still, let me show you a little something. Get dressed." She did, putting her clothes and then armor back on. "And now for a little magic! *Be cleansed!*" Magic swirled around the pair, and she looked down at herself.

"You are a handy guy to have around, aren't you?"

"You're just noticing that? I'm hurt, I really am."

"Wouldn't do to let you get a swelled head."

"Yeah, I wouldn't be able to put my armor on if my head was any bigger." He put his hands to his temples. "I could squish it down if I had to though."

"Not literally swelled, it's a figure of- I'm getting something to eat." She stalked off in a huff.

"What?"

"So now what?" she asked after they had eaten. "Go after the people that used this base?"

"Actually, I was thinking about what you said last night, about being alone. Why not look for some more magic users in the world? I refuse to accept that you're the only one. We find a few more and you can learn some more spells from them, and maybe they'll help us. We'll need all the power we can get, in the end, and magic is it."

"You really think we'll find more?"

"Why not? You can't remember being the only one, right?"

"I suppose that's true enough. I'll keep an eye on you while you ask."

"Thanks." So he called for the spirit of the dragonfly and then settled in a chair to ask the universe where the nearest magic user was that wasn't Terra. He got back two words.

*South Figaro*

"Get out those maps," he commanded, opening his eyes again. "We're heading to a town in the south."

Chapter 4  
On the Trail of a General  
When: Day 7  
Where: Approaching the town of South Figaro

So it turned out the town of South Figaro was fairly near to their location, due south and a bit west, right near the coast. They slaughtered their way through the random encounters to the cave in the south, and skipped it, taking the airship over. By that point the town was nearly due west so they just flew it the rest of the way, taking a well-deserved rest. In all they had traveled four additional days, as they weren't sprinting as fast as they could go at all times. As the pair had absolutely no idea what to expect there they were hanging some distance away in the balloon and looking through a powerful telescope down at the town.

"Wish I could remember if you could make a fortune selling these," Terra had remarked, seemingly impressed with the thing. "But this one could be terrible, for all I know."

"Still, it shows what we need to see, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. That is a depressingly high number of soldiers wandering around that town."

"And I take it those mechanical things stomping around and guarding the paths in and out are what you call a magitek armor?"

"I don't remember anything else a magitek armor could be. Though 'armor' usually implies something worn close to the body, these certainly look armored enough to be called that directly."

"And furthermore they will stomp all over us should we attempt to actually fight one?"

"They are the major source of the empire's power," she sadly agreed, at least recalling that much. "I don't know what my fire magic would do against a machine, and the rest of the spells I've learned in the meantime are all curative in nature. I suppose I could *drain* it over and over and over again."

"Throwing lightning at it would probably be my choice," Lysanias mused. "But let's not ever need to try it because we stay far away from them."

"Good plan. In fact, let's just try something else."

"What?" He looked at her, startled.

"You realize why your ability brought us here, right?"

"No, why?"

"Because this other magic user is obviously also connected to the empire!"

"So?"

"So they're not going to come willingly."

"You don't know," he parroted back at her. "Besides, what if they're a person like you?"

"You mean with a slave crown on? Oh, I didn't think of that. I guess they could, they wouldn't need to be doing the empire's work willingly." She stared at the town a moment. "We'll have to go in and see, won't we?"

"I think we owe it to whoever this magic user is to see if they want to be freed, and then free them. And if they don't, well, we deal the empire another blow and force the issue."

"You can get us out in a hurry?"

"Of course. Do you remember something that could be helpful?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "There may have been two other magic users hanging around. One that might be reasonable and one that certainly won't be. If we run into the wrong one..."

"We have to take the chance."

"I know we do. You better come up with a plan, then."

“Getting in is the first step.” He took the glass back and looked the town over. It was in a heavily forested area, and had a high wall around most of the town. There seemed to be an entrance by the docks and another to the west, where a path had been cut through the trees. Both were covered by two magitek armors, which seemed to be sweeping some kind of beam across the entrance they were guarding. “We could probably slip past the guards with ignore me wards on, of course we wouldn’t be able to talk to anyone that way. There’s a few channels where water runs through the town, we could get in that way but not wearing any wards.”

“I don’t know if I know how to swim.”

“That’s a problem. But we could go further down the coast and try that out.”

“Like you don’t see enough of me when I get ready for bed. I’d have to take *everything* off to go swimming.”

Lysanias turned red. “If you didn’t want me to see you... I don’t know the social norms here... Why didn’t you say something if you...”

She laughed and beeped his nose. “I don’t remember anyone as easy to tease as you. Go back to thinking about the plan.”

“I will, see that I don’t.” *In reality, I could probably use water bending to keep a bubble of air around her and just swim us both into the place. If they don’t have metal grates or something blocking access.* “Wait a second.” He focused the glass on the roofs of the houses and an idea formed in his mind. “Ever wonder what it would be like to be a bird?”

“A bird?”

“That’s right. We can just fly in, they would never look twice at another bird or two.”

“Maybe I can swim and maybe I can’t, but I’m fairly sure I have no idea how to fly.”

“Again, we can practice some ways away. And I can air bend us, it won’t be so much flying is just letting the air take you. That’s what I do for my wings, though I’ve gotten pretty good at flying on my own too. It would probably translate, I can show you.”

“Let’s leave that as plan number 2,” she decided. “Keep thinking about it.”

Then it finally came to him. “I’m an idiot.”

“I don’t remember you saying that before, but I’ll take your word for it.” She had her head tilted to the side and was just faintly grinning.

“Thanks. I know how we can get in. It’s easy. I was thinking about all sorts of complicated plans, I skipped right over the easy ones. Having a lot of abilities is going to be confusing after a while.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Anyway, we can basically become ghosts, I recall my friends in the last world mentioning it but I never thought to try it. When under the influence of the moon spirit apparently we can be as ethereal as moonlight. Just like when under the influence of the spirit of the wind I get faster.”

“Ghosts? I think I actually like the bird plan better.”

“It’s fine, this will be more useful in case we get cornered. I would hate the fact that I was here to get back to the shadow avatar this early, they might step up plans here or whatever.” He sighed. “But our confrontation is coming one way or another.”

“Still, whatever form it takes, you don’t want it making plans to counter you, specifically, right? From what you said there are other agents doing what you do, and they all have unique powers. It won’t know what it’s dealing with until you show yourself.”

“Exactly! Come on, we’ll land, wait until it’s a little bit darker, and I’ll chant for a few minutes. We can pass right through the wall, and see, the path to enlightenment will be clear.”

“We still need to find this person.”

“That should be easy. They’re either a high ranking officer or someone shambling

around like a zombie doing anything anyone tells them.”

“What’s a zombie?”

“Undead creature. Believe you, you don’t want to know.”

So they waited just outside town until the stars started peeking out, and Lysanias figured that was dark enough. He couldn’t sense these people walking around because they had no life energy, but hopefully he could carefully peek through the wall, make sure the coast was clear, and not be seen. He chanted for several minutes, figuring it wouldn’t take too long to cover the town, again it wasn’t much bigger than Narche. *We’ll be on our way with a new ally in no time. But what is with these small towns? Of course I’ve only seen the two, way too few to base any opinion on but it’s still kind of odd.*

With that accomplished the two focused on willing themselves to become like moonlight, and Terra found to her delight she could indeed pass through normal matter. They could still see each other, they still had apparent mass, but the world around them now ignored them completely. It was thus fairly easy to step through the wall and into the city proper. No one was nearby, so the two willed themselves solid again and looked around.

“Where do we start?” Terra asked.

“A high ranking officer wouldn’t be out patrolling the streets like a common soldier, they would have a room someplace they could issue orders from. Besides, it’s getting dark, they’d probably want a nice meal.”

“And in the case of someone wearing a slave crown?”

“They wouldn’t want that advertised, and it would be a high ranking officer looking after them anyway. So I think our plan would be the same. Let’s head to the inn, get some dinner, and keep our eyes open.”

“Okay.”

The two made their way through town, and there seem to be far fewer soldiers in the streets, making Lysanias wonder just where the heck they had gone. He didn’t have long to wait as he found them gathered at the pub, which was attached to the inn. At the bar was a man dressed all in black that had a dog at his side, while the soldiers called for more drink and entertainment. The guy with the dog ignored it all, drinking alone.

“How are we going to learn anything in this?” Terra asked him, voice raised to be heard over the crowd.

“That’s a good question,” he admitted back.

They found a table and sat down, looking around the room and trying to pick out individual conversations. *I could focus my senses like Korra was learning to do, but that might actually be the opposite of what I want to do. Hearing better in here doesn’t mean I would hear individuals talking better, just that I would hear everyone talking at once better.*

But the two didn’t have long to wait as a serving woman gasped and quickly came over to them. “Who are you two?” she asked sharply. “I’ve never seen you before.”

“We’re just visiting town,” Terra told her, after Lysanias sort of locked up. “What’s good tonight?”

“What’s good tonight? Are you crazy!?! Come on before someone realizes!” She grabbed Terra by the hand and made her way to the back. Terra waved at him to *come on* and he quickly got up to follow. They went into the back, and the woman stood by the door making sure no one had paid attention to their leaving. They were in a storeroom, jammed in with the cleaning supplies. “I think we’re okay, the soldiers are pretty out of it. But I can’t stay long, I’ll be missed.”

“What’s this all about?” Terra asked, hands on her hips.

“It’s about getting out of here!” the server told them. “I don’t recognize you, so the soldiers won’t either. That would mean you found a way to come in after the occupation, right?”

*Oh, she's got a point. We're really bad at this. I never considered the fact after a few days the soldiers would have a good idea who was in town, and who wasn't. A new face would stand out. And my armor is rather distinctive, though I suppose it's not that bad if I'm not using metal bending on the cables.*

"I suppose," she admitted. "But we can't really get anyone out that same way."

"But you have to, please!" she pleaded, falling to her knees. "It's my son, I'm afraid he'll do something stupid to a soldier and get hurt. Or worse, they'll force him to enlist, I've heard rumors of people getting taken by the empire for experimentation or whatever. He's all I have, please!"

She looked over at Lysanias, who shrugged. "We can't watch a child!"

"I agree. Where would you go, anyway?" Terra asked her. "Narshe is days away, do you know how many random encounters we had between there and here? He wouldn't make it. Not without thousands of gold worth of phoenix downs, anyway."

"I have to do something, you're my only hope!"

Terra looked over at Lysanias again, like "do something!" but he clearly had no idea what. To stall a bit he held a hand out. "Come on, get up, that's no place for you." *But I can see how our God would get used to that sort of thing. It is rather- no, bad thought Lysanias.*

"I'm so sorry," she admitted, tearing up. "I just don't know what else to do. And having to serve all these stupid soldiers don't help." She stood up but her head hung limply.

"The soldiers, of course!" Lysanias realized.

"What? You've got an idea?" Terra asked.

"Maybe. What if I could tell you that after tonight, this town wouldn't have nearly as many soldiers in it as it did today?"

"You could kill them all?" she asked, hope now shining in her eyes.

"Er, no. Well, maybe? The point is, Terra, think about why we're here. Either one of them goes missing tonight, willing or not, what do you think happens?"

She considered a moment, then it came to her too. "A big uproar. They'd start scouring the area to find out where they went. They wouldn't be allowed to just sit here and occupy the town!"

"Exactly. We steal this person right out from under their noses, and not only are they going to be in a heap of trouble, if we do it right so they don't blame the townspeople they'll just leave."

"Are you here for that general everyone's talking about?" asked the woman.

"What general?" both asked excitedly.

"I don't know," she replied, trying to take a step back. "Some general supposedly turned traitor and was captured. She's being taken back to Vector by boat tomorrow, that's why at least some of the soldiers are here. Are you two with the Returners? Didn't hear they had a lot of stupid people in their ranks, walking around a town they couldn't possibly be from."

Terra ignored the barb. "Jackpot," she breathed. "Do you know where we can find this person?"

"No, I don't. But if you really think it would help?" She looked between the two. "You rescuing this general will draw soldiers off?"

"We'll try to do it in a flashy way, so they have to come after us," Terra promised her. "And if not, I don't know, can we come back and help?"

"Once I've seen a few more towns, maybe," Lysanias considered. "All I've seen around here is the empty cave and Narshe. That's a dangerous place to be, what with the empire no doubt going to try your failed mission again."

"I agree, but what does that have to do with it?"

"Never mind that for now. Get back to work. If you can get us more information about where she's being held, we'll do what we can for you," he promised.

"I have no other choice," she agreed. "Wait here."

She slipped out the door and went back to work, closing it behind her.

“So, we’re stuck in a closet together,” Terra told him. “What shall we do about that?”

“I should start asking the universe where to find this general. Or figure out some way to use my powers to locate them. It’s too bad magic sense is so short range, they would be the only other person with MP around here.”

“Oh.” She seemed a little disappointed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Why, what did you have in mind?”

“Nothing.” She waved her hands in front of her. “I mean the same thing. I mean get to work. Stupid!”

“Right...”

He first got his spirit out, with the intent to go look around the inn and see if there was a room under guard. Failing that to walk around the town as it had done in Narshe, just to check the place out a bit. As he could put it anywhere when it came out he simply put it on the other side of the door and it walked away. *What would happen if I put it inside someone when it came out? Do I even want to consider it?*

With that done he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes, figuring out the best question to ask the universe.

*What is the first step to successfully finding the general that is now supposedly a traitor to the empire?*

*Wait*

“Okay, I guess we just wait,” he said, coming out of it. He had checked in with his spirit, who was just wandering around at random, having found nothing of interest.

“That’s the answer you got?”

“I asked what the first step was. That’s what I got back.”

“Somewhat broad, don’t you think? I mean the first step would be opening the door, or maybe grasping the handle.”

“I don’t think the universe is that petty.”

“You don’t know.”

“True. But let’s just wait for now.”

Moments later the door cracked open and the server slipped inside again. “Okay,” she said, “the only information I can get is that she’s being held underground someplace.”

“Underground?” Lysanias repeated excitedly. “That’s a stroke of luck.”

“It is?”

“Sure is. Thanks a lot. We’ll get out of here and take care of it.”

“If you’re sure. Don’t get killed.”

“Of course not,” Terra told her.

She looked somewhat doubtful but slipped out again, allowing the pair to do the same a moment later and sneak out.

“So what are you going to dazzle me with this time?” she asked, hiding in the space between the inn and the pub. The buildings were connected but by the second floor, creating a sort of “bridge” as there was no first floor. You can pass under it, and the pair was now hiding there. “Okay, your feet apparently?”

Lysanias finished taking off his shoe. “I can use my senses to find things in the earth. Something big enough to be a prison is going to be easy to find.”

“But how do we get down to it? Turn ourselves into burrowing mice?”

“One thing at a time.” He slammed a foot down after closing his eyes, “reading” the earth below. “Nothing much here. Where would I be if I was an underground prison

in this town?"

"Someplace big?" Terra suggested. "There's a lot of water around here." She pointed to the waterways that cut the town in half. "You wouldn't build below that, right? Too much seepage."

"True. Let's try this way." The pair went north and tried again, and this time he got a clear result. "There's a series of tunnels under us," he told her. "I think we're close. Ah, here comes the man now." But the man was the spirit, as it knew Lysanias wanted it back. "I'm going to pull you out again, but underground in that tunnel," he told it for Terra's sake. "Then you can look around and I can teleport down there." It vanished, and he put this shoe back on.

"What's teleport?"

"That quick exit I promised you earlier. Only this time we're using it to go down."

*Are you ready, spirit?*

*I'm ready.*

And the spirit was in the tunnel.

*I love being able to call that thing out on the first try now. So much nicer.*

He looked through the spirit's eyes, made sure the tunnel was clear, and having grabbed Terra's hand teleported down to find the general.

Moments later they were staring through the bars of a door at a beautiful, but beat up, General Celes Chere.

Chapter 5  
What they did with the General  
When: Night of day 7  
Where: Outside Celes' cell

Lysanias wasn't exactly sure what this place was. It wasn't a cave, or a hole in the ground, it was *finished*. Like there were bookcases in the walls and the walls themselves were smooth and wallpapered. But beyond that door was a chained up girl wearing mostly rags. The only other things in the room were a bucket, and a chair with a sleeping man. *What exactly is this place used for normally? And how did the empire find it?*

"That can't be the general, can it?" Terra whispered. "Though she does seem vaguely familiar."

"Maybe she can lead us to the general? Maybe we misunderstood and she's just a general person in the empire's army?" He paused. "No, she's the magic user all right, I feel at least a little MP left inside her."

"Either way, we can't just leave her! Can you do that teleport thing and get her out here?"

He shook his head. "I can only move myself and those I can touch. I can't wish her from there to here. Also it's pretty loud from what I understand. Teleporting in and out of there will wake that guard for sure." *Though what would happen if I did it while insubstantial? Would it still make the noise?*

"Oh. It was pretty neat though, how you brought us here. I don't think I've seen even a fraction of your little tricks, have I?"

"Thanks, and no, probably not." He tried the door handle, but it was of course locked. "Actually, we should still be within our limit for the moon spirit, I chanted for quite some time. We can just go in there through the door."

"Wait!" Terra put a hand on his arm. "Shouldn't we keep you out of sight for the moment?"

"I guess, why?"

"We promised that girl we would put on a show, make sure they come after us and leave this town alone. But if the shadow avatar is involved in all this they might recognize you from a description. If they know you're around they might start giving us more grief, or widen the search early because they know what you can do. I've got a plan."

"I'll support you from here if I can."

"I'm counting on it. One thing, I can make something insubstantial that I touch, right? Like you teleporting me earlier?"

"I've no idea, I've never done this before. But I guess, you're not passing through your clothes, are you? They go with you, so it must be selective. I mean you're not phasing the floor, are you?"

"Then I know what I'm going to do." She concentrated and passed through the door, then became solid again. She gently supported the woman in the cell and went insubstantial, the chains holding her up now swinging free as her arms flopped down.

*Is that what she wanted? I guess you can make only part of someone insubstantial like that. How about that? I mean their arms probably wouldn't work, they're attached. But would clothes work? Rings? What's she doing?*

Terra had taken down the chains and was motioning him, then stuck them through the door. He went insubstantial himself so he could interact with them, then considered what she wanted. *Does she want them open? I suppose I could do that, maybe?* He touched them, feeling the metal inside. *This part is solid, this part isn't metal, maybe moving this over here?* They clicked open. *Huh. Didn't know I could do that either.*

With them open Terra carefully fitted one over the man's left hand, then gently

over his right. She then motioned to the hook that had been holding up the woman. By this time she was coming around, and looked blearily at Terra, who put a finger to her lips. She blinked. Terra turned back to the door with a "well?" expression on her face.

*That will wake him up*, he sent into her brain. She lit up, smiling as she realized he was doing something she hadn't seen before.

*"I know,"* she mouthed to him, tilting her head like "get on with it."

*Okay.* He grabbed the chain with metal bending and yanked it, waking the guy up as he flew across the room to be hooked on the hook that had been holding the woman. Now he was dangling there instead, nearly off the ground.

"What's going- YOU!" he exclaimed, startled awake. "You're... You're..."

"The third magic user in the empire," Celes finished for him, voice hoarse, but smiling fiercely. "You're in trouble now..."

"That's right," Terra told him. "As you can see, I've escaped the 'tender mercies' of the empire and I'm acting on my own now. I'll be taking my fellow magic user out of here. And just so there's no mistaking me: Cure!" Magic energy swirled around the woman, and she visibly relaxed with a groan as her HP was replenished.

"Marry me!"

"Maybe later. Now, I have a message for your boss."

"Yeah, so do I," said the woman, sounding stronger as she got up. "Kefka's going to be pretty upset you let me escape. I know he wanted to see if my magic could be extracted before I died, so it could be given to another. Well, that's not happening, is it?"

"That's right, it's not," Terra agreed, playing along as if she had known that was what they were going to do with her. "So as you were on guard duty, you screwed it up, you get to tell Kefka this; there's only three magic users on the planet right now. Us two, and him. Soon there's only going to be us two."

"He'll regret how he treated us," the woman promised. "Try to get the whole message delivered before he tears your tongue out."

"You can't just leave me here!" protested the soldier, trying to rattle the chain off the hook. Lysanias poured energy into it, wondering if he could soften the metal and then draw the energy away from it, making it basically weld itself together. If it worked or not, the soldier didn't go anywhere.

"Quiet!" Terra snarled, and we stopped moving again, looking terrified.

"Don't hurt me, don't hurt me!" he pleaded, trying to swing away from her.

"Do you know what this girl did?" the woman asked the soldier, walking over to check his bonds. She leaned in close and whispered. "Have you heard the rumors?"

He swallowed. "The rumor is she killed fifty or a hundred soldiers in minutes. While Kefka sat there and laughed about it."

Lysanias registered her shock as she heard this, but she didn't betray it.

"That's right. You do not want to get her angry. So you better just hang there quietly, in my place, until morning. Then give Kefka our message. We'll know if you don't."

"Okay!" His eyes were wide and his breathing ragged as he looked between the two most powerful and dangerous people on the continent at the moment. (At least as far as he knew. He didn't know what magic could do, after all.)

"Thanks for the rescue, Terra," said the woman with a smile. "Now let's get out of here."

"Take my hand," she said, offering it.

"Gladly."

And they walked through the door. Out in the hall Lysanias was leaning there, giving a slow clap. "Very nice," he praised. "But perhaps you ladies would like to take my hands, and we can get out of here before some sort of alarm is raised."

"Who are you?" the woman demanded, holding a hand up as magical energy swirled around it.

Lysanias looked her over. She was fairly beautiful, with long yellowish hair tied back with a hair band.

"He's the reason you're getting out at all," Terra told her. She took his hand. "Come on, we don't really want to kill anyone around here."

"Why not? They're all just miserable empire pawns. Like... I was." She finished this much softer.

"We'll explain later. Are you coming or what?"

"Coming where? Holding his hand isn't going to wish us out of here!"

"Oh, you'd be surprised."

"Fine. But this had better be-" She grabbed his other hand and he *shifted*.

With that the three were back at the abandoned headquarters, and Terra was throwing her arms around Lysanias.

"We did it!" she squealed. "We did it! We rescued her!"

"That we did," he agreed, as she nervously looked around in shock. "But perhaps we should explain ourselves before she freaks out?"

"I've snapped," she decided. "I'm still in that cell, but my brain is tricking me into thinking I've been whisked away from there. It's the only explanation."

"Come and sit down," Terra told her gently, taking her by the arm. "We'll explain everything. Are you hungry?"

"Starving. They haven't fed me in two days. But it's water I want at the moment, if that's okay?"

"I'll get her some," Lysanias offered. "See what food we have left too. Be right back." He stepped out, and there were still supplies of that nature around so he came back to find Terra draping a blanket over the woman's shoulders. "Here you go."

"Thank you," she said gratefully, taking a huge draft from the water bottle. "Ah, that's the stuff," she managed when it was empty. Then she started attacking the dried nuts and fruits that made up the "rations" packs they had found.

"You must have seen a woman ravenously devour everything put in front of her," she said, mouth full. "Start talking, who are you? Terra I know about," she swallowed. "By reputation, anyway. But how did you do that? Where are we?"

"Before all that, what do we call you?" Terra asked.

"I'm Celes Chere, ex-general in the fabulous empire."

"Nice to meet you, Celes, I'm Lysanias. As for who I am," he stole a glance at Terra, "I'll have to start at the beginning."

Her food forgotten, Celes listened to the incredible tale and when it was done, Terra grabbed him sideways by the shoulders. "And then we saved you! The two magic using girls are wild and free at last! The world will never be the same!"

"You have that right," she agreed. "I sort of knew about the crown, but I didn't really think too much of it," she admitted. "It wasn't healthy to think too much about that sort of thing, you understand. But when you failed to get the esper, Kefka started raving about it, and I realized without you to order around, I might be next."

"So you decided to escape?"

"Pretty much. He's been less and less stable lately, I even heard him shouting at his quartermaster to ship in enough poison to take out a castle. It was time."

*Wait, she deserted basically to save her own skin? Because this Kefka might turn his attentions on her, now that Terra had been lost? That sounds pretty selfish. Wait, did she say-* "A whole castle?"

"Can you tell me about myself? Who am I? Why can't I even read?" Terra pressed.

"Look, all I know is, two people have undergone my grandfather's procedure to be infused with magic. Kefka, who apparently is going nuts, and..." she indicated herself. "You somehow always had magic, from what I heard. Even as a kid my

grandfather was fascinated by the 'magical girl' and wanted me to become one too. Maybe that's why he did Kefka first, to try it out, iron out the kinks? I have no idea. In any case if you can't even read it's probably because you were never taught. As far as I know you've been a captive of the empire your entire life."

Terra's legs dropped out from under her, dumping her on the floor. "That's why I don't have any memories," she whispered. "I didn't forget. I just never had any. I'm not even a person, am I? I was just a thing for this Kefa to play with. A monster, made to... made to..." Tears were spilling from her eyes.

Lysanias crouched down, taking her in his arms to comfort her. "I'm sorry. I wish there was something I could do."

"I know," she managed.

Celes looked depressed, but went back to eating.

Some time later Terra dried her eyes and moved to a chair. "Well," she said with false cheerfulness, "if I don't have any memories I'll just have to make some, won't I? I'm still young, there's plenty of time."

"Kicking Kefka's butt might be a nice one to add to the old mental scrapbook," Celes suggested, tapping her head.

"You know something? She's right," she agreed with a laugh. "I like how this girl thinks!"

"If you two don't mind, I'm turning in for the night," Celes told them. "I can barely keep my eyes open, I've been hanging in one place or another since they caught me. Tomorrow I will enthusiastically thank you for freeing me, but for now I'm *done*."

"Let me go fix up a third bed real quick. You going to be okay?"

Terra nodded. "I have to move forward from here. The empire stole my entire childhood. Maybe it was the shadow avatar, maybe it was just Kefka being insane. We move forward, and we make them pay for it."

"Well said!" Celes told her, standing. She swooned, almost sitting down again, but held up her hand and steadied. "Lead the way."

So he fixed up the third bed and she dropped into it, not kidding about being exhausted. He adjusted her blanket and went back to see Terra.

"We should get to sleep too," she told him. "I think we'll have a busy day tomorrow. We jumped ahead to here, but we'll have to *stay* one step ahead once that message is delivered. They won't be looking this far away yet, but that doesn't mean they won't. They know about this base after all."

"Agreed. Celes was a general, maybe she can give us some pointers about hurting the empire, slowing them down. We're still just three people, we need more help. Or a weak spot."

"Where Kefka vacations?"

"Maybe."

"There must be other prisoners, returners they've captured maybe? There's probably a lot she can tell us about the inner workings."

"True. If we can keep up this hit and run style of attack, maybe we can even trick them into thinking we're a larger group than we are. We'll have some options now." *We could look for who used this place originally, maybe see where they went. But would they want two known empiric magic users hanging around? They won't know what these woman have been through. So they wouldn't trust them. Maybe it's better to stay away.*

"We won't have any less."

"Come on, I'll lead so you don't smash into something. We'll have to rig up a light in there, if this is going to be a more permanent base." *Maybe some sunlight, now that I think about it. I could do some alchemy here, not that I don't have a couple already.* He set his sword with the sunlight in the pommel just cracked open enough to not have

complete darkness in this part of the cave, and both got into bed.

The next morning Lysanias woke to find the girls talking.

“So what happened with me?” Terra asked. “You said there were rumors I, you know, killed some people?”

Celes drew in a breath. “Yeah, that happened. You were given some kind of prototype magitek armor I guess, and sent on your way. From what I heard magitek responds differently to you for some reason.”

“How so?”

“Well, the most common weapons you’ll find on a magitek are the beams. Ice, fire, bolt, and healing.”

“Healing *beam*?”

“Exactly! Healing! Beam!”

She giggled. “Quiet, you’ll wake him!”

“So? Anyway, when you got in it you could make it do other stuff.”

“Like what?”

“It was classified above my level. Sorry.”

She sighed. “Probably better that I don’t know. What other terrible things have I done? Do I even want to know? Either way I have to make up for the lives I’ve taken. Somehow.”

“You and me both. I killed some people taking the town of Maranda, thinking I was doing the glorious work of the most powerful empire in the world. Bringing peace to the world, doing my part for the cause. I had magic, how could I have *not* been chosen by the goddesses? I should have realized earlier.”

“I can’t say one way or the other. You could walk around of your own free will. I didn’t get that luxury.”

“I guess I was always jealous of the ‘magical girl’ and sort of looked the other way when you were around. I know I can’t make up for that...”

“Shouldn’t stop you from trying.”

“Let me know if I ever get close, okay?”

“I’ll put you down at a one so far on the ‘making up for it’ scale, that seems fair.”

“How high do the numbers go on this scale? Are we talking Fahrenheit or Celsius?”

“I have no idea what those are. As for how high, that’s for me to know.”

“Keep me guessing, huh?”

“Shoot for the stars!”

They laughed softly. “Deal.”

“So crazy question, what magic do you know? And can we teach each other the spells we know if they’re different?”

“Good idea. I learned ice at level one, what about you?”

“Ice? That’s weird. I learned cure. I wonder what that says about us?”

“You think it means anything? I suppose it could. What was next?”

“For me it was fire next.”

“Oh, fire and ice? Think we’ll actually get along?”

“We have been so far, right?”

“You rescued me, I stumbled in here and fell asleep, we’ve been talking for what, ten minutes? Talk about first impressions.”

“You don’t think we will?” She sounded disappointed.

“I’m just saying it’s not really enough time to tell. I learned antidote next, at level 8.”

“Ha! Beat you, I learned that at level 6.”

“What level are you, anyway?”

“That’s rather personal, don’t you think?”

“If you don’t want to-”

"I'm level 13."

"-tell me. Oh. So am I! That's odd."

"Is it? I have no idea."

"What did you learn at level 13?"

"I learned Drain... at level 12." She sounded haughty.

"Oh, I see. That's how it's going to be, is it? I learned Imp."

"Imp? What's that do?"

"Turn somebody into an imp."

There was a moment of silence. "I'm not sure what I expected."

"I'm not sure either."

"What good is it?"

"I'm not sure yet. Want to see?"

"Sure!"

"Okay. Imp!"

There was another moment of silence.

"You cast it on me, didn't you?" Lysanias groaned.

"Don't listen in to girl's conversations then!"

"There's a whole cave out- what did you do to me?" Lysanias had tried to point at the other parts of the cave but had caught sight of his arm.

The girls didn't stop laughing for some time after that.

## Chapter 6

### Max Party Size

When: After being de-imped

Where: Returner's Hideout (that is quickly becoming their personal hideout)

"So tell me about this Kefka," Lysanias requested at the table as they ate breakfast. "He sounds like a good candidate for the guy we're looking for."

"I can tell you a few things," Celes admitted. "His behavior has gone downhill since his magic infusion. He delights in destruction, calls for catastrophe, seeks the surrender of the free to the state. His lust for ever greater power grows by the day, and he seems to not care how many get killed by his actions. You heard what he made Terra do? To be clear that was against his own soldiers, not enemies of the empire. He picked a battalion at random and just had her slaughter them, for kicks."

"Do you have to say it like that?" Terra asked, looking a bit pained.

"It's what happened."

"Still..."

She shrugged. "Anyway, if that's the kind of person you're looking for, look no further. The emperor is kind and rational compared to him. Why he doesn't do something about Kefka... I guess because he gets results, or maybe the emperor is afraid of him? Who can say?"

"Or maybe he has the emperor under control with a slave crown," Terra offered. "So if things go wrong he has someone to blame."

"That's also possible. Ugh, to think there could be two of those awful Relics in the world... Isn't this all a moot point though? Unless you can just wish yourself to him he's always surrounded by guards. You can't fight an entire army yourself. Or can you?"

"No, probably not," Lysanias admitted. "Though I've never really tried."

"That's the kind of thing you can only try once!"

"True. We need more help."

"My grandpa Cid will probably help. Getting to him is the trouble. His lab is in Vector, that's the capital of the empire and on another continent to boot."

"At least the second part is no trouble, we can fly there," Terra mused. "But who knows how the capital is guarded?"

"I do. Believe me, it's heavily guarded."

"We could make it, but it's tricky," Lysanias decided. "With you now escaped, Cid will probably be watched more closely than ever. The empire won't want to lose him, will they? If they thought he was thinking of joining you in exile..."

"He's the guy that makes all the weapons and armor, and I mean magitek armor not this stuff." She banged a fist on Lysanias' armor. "He's under constant guard, not that he notices. He's usually too deep into his work. He won't be easy to get near without a lot of fuss."

"Is that our next destination?" Terra asked. "Because it's going to take a lot of levels before I feel right about wandering around the heart of the empire. Even if I can look like a different person."

"I actually wanted to ask you about that," Lysanias told her. "You girls were talking about what spells you learned at what levels. Am I to assume that you're just walking along, you beat up some monsters that come out of nowhere, and suddenly ta-da, you know a new spell?"

The two looked at each other and nodded.

"Exactly," Terra agreed.

"That really isn't how it works for you?" Celes added.

"How could that possibly work for *anybody*?" he questioned, voice rising in pitch. "Where is that knowledge coming from? How can you have a 'battle power' of one thing, then just from beating up a rabbit or whatever suddenly that number is higher one second later? It makes no sense!"

"That's just how it works around here, don't get so bent out of shape about it," Celes told him.

"Now, now, it's not his fault he doesn't do things sensibly," Terra told her.

"I suppose you're right," she agreed. She turned to him. "Poor soul, I pity you."

"What's that?" He held a hand to his ear. "You *don't* want to borrow my sword for our trip across country? Or have a shield made for you? You'll just take your chances in those rags as we're attacked again and again by monsters?"

"Lysanias! Buddy! Pal! *Friend!* You're the best, have I said that?"

"I've always said that," Terra agreed with a giggle.

"As have I!" she agreed hastily. "He's our rock in a time of need, our shield during times of strife. I'd marry him in an instant!"

"Hey, I saw him first. Besides, you asked me most recently."

"That I did! Still waiting for an answer there. Can I get you anything? Did you have enough to eat?"

"That's more like it."

"So we're good?"

"I'll think about it. For now, why don't you girls raid the place for some clothes, and I'll ask the universe about our next steps. I want to make sure Kefka is the only other magic user in the world. If not, we have more recruiting to do."

"And then a shield?" Celes pressed.

"You could just use the one he made me earlier," Terra told him. "I bought one, so we have it hanging around. Oh, I'll connect you to my inventory so you can see what we've got."

"Thanks." The two touched hands, and Celes seemed to look off into space.

"Couple of potions, phoenix downs, a tent, odds and ends I guess. No Relics..." She scowled.

"If you need anything, use it. It's our inventory now."

"Thanks."

They went off to see what they could find equipment wise that was useful and Lysanias closed his eyes.

*I suppose if they do learn magic just from 'leveling up' as well as getting stronger and tougher in the form of greater HP, I can't really complain they want to do more of it. I would, if I could learn magic that way. I mean I can just wish it up, but then I'm stuck with it forever, bouncing around my head. That's no way to live. Luckily, so far, haven't needed any other magic than I already have. My other abilities have been enough. Anyway, better get to it. Apart from the two girls, myself, and this Kefka I haven't seen, are there other magic users on this world?*

Yes

*That's great!* "Hey girls, good news! Or maybe bad? Now that I think about it? There's other magic users around than you two or Kefka."

"Seriously?" Terra asked in surprise, poking her head back into the room.

"That's what I got back. I'll ask roughly where and we can head in that direction."

"That's amazing, keep at it!"

*Now for a question to figure out if they're in the empire, or what? Maybe if I ask generally where they are and get "south" they're in the empire. If I get that they're east of here they're not? I'll try that.*

*Where would I go to find the greatest concentration of magic users that is not this cave?*

No answer

*Excluding this cave, what direction would I go in to meet the greatest number of magic users on this planet?*

*South east.*

By this time a half hour had passed and the girls were finished raiding the cave. Celes had some mismatched clothes which was better than she had before, and the two were waiting for him.

"Get out that map we found," he told them. "We're looking for a town south east of here."

They did, and looked it over. "Nikeah is directly east of us, can't be there," Celes mused. "Nor the castle. I think that's the castle Kefka wanted to poison everyone, hope they got out okay. It's mostly ocean south east of here, really. There's the veldt, do you know the monsters don't give XP there?"

"What, none?" asked Terra.

"Nope. Weirdest thing. Granddad was always going to look into why, never got around to it. Anyway, there's some towns nearby that we could check out."

"In either case, our launching point will be the coast, right?" Terra asked, tracing a finger south. "We can head down the path between these two mountains and away from South Figaro."

"Have to go through Mt. Kolts."

"We went over it before."

"Really? Why not just appear outside South Figaro like you brought me here and head east a bit?"

"Leveling."

"Oh, right. Stupid of me. So then why go over the mountain? Wouldn't going through it be better?"

"We were sort of pressed for time before. But I can see another reason to go there."

"What's that?"

"Check the place out. If we really are going to use this as our base, and it seems like we are, we should make sure no magitek armor can get through the cave. That means making sure it's all narrow paths and tight doorways."

"I can make that happen," Lysanias told them.

"Sure, but can you do it two days ago?" Celes asked.

"Uh, no?"

"Then isn't that area going to be extremely dangerous? The empire is going to head straight here through that cave, I mean they know about this place now, right?"

"She's right," Terra admitted, scowling.

"Naturally. We don't want to get stuck here. I mean unless you can just wish us someplace else."

"I could." *But there must be some other way out of here. Some back way we never came across. Those people left here, and the empire showed up. They wouldn't have had to do that if they had been captured. Ergo, they were not captured. Ergo they escaped somehow in a direction the empire didn't come from.*

"But we have to head there."

"No we don't!"

"We do. I just feel it. Somehow, there's something we need to do there. Please? Back me up, Lysanias."

"It's something I've observed before," he admitted. "My coming to a world changes things. For one, who knows who would have rescued Terra before? In her

original destiny she may have passed through that cave and had something happen. Sometimes people get a sense of that, but I've never had the opportunity to see if that feeling is actually right."

"Guess I'm being outvoted."

"We'll be careful, I promise. You think I want to be recaptured by the empire? But I feel this has to be done."

"Guess we better get started, then."

The group left the cave and traveled south for several days, but not before Lysanias pulled up more rock in the area and stacked it in front the door. He put some "ignore me" wards on the chunks of rock, figuring any magitek armor would be in for a surprise if they tried to enter the cave.

"What if the people originally using it come back?" asked Celes.

"Then we'll pass them going the other way, as this is the only way to this cave. Otherwise it's been more than a week since they left, so I think technically it's ours now."

"Okay, that works."

So they walked, and they fought, and the two learned a bit more about the empire from Celes. The two magic users learned each other's spells because to not be able to do that would be quite odd. Finally they looked up at the path that led to the cave that led into the mountain.

"No troops," Celes reported, looking up at the place. "Strange."

"I agree, unless you weren't as important as you thought and they didn't even bother coming after you."

"Maybe you're the unimportant one."

"No doubt."

"Hey, I didn't mean it like, come back! Terra!"

At the top of the path was a wide open area where the cave was, but the group saw something else there. It was a man. A shirtless man. A very well-muscled, very shirtless, man. He had colorful cloths tied to his pants, and his hair was blue and up in a long ponytail. He was staring out at the countryside, apparently deep in thought.

"Oh my!" said Celes.

"Oh my is right!" agreed Terra. "I take back what I said, you can have Lysanias if I can have this guy."

"I saw him first."

"By like a second!"

"Ladies, please," pleaded Lysanias. "Keep in mind I could totally take that guy."

"Could you, stranger? Could you indeed?" He turned, showing off his chest as his arms were clasped behind him. There was another round of "oh my's" from the ladies. He did a double take. He looked around. "Who spoke?"

"I did." Lysanias checked himself (before he wrecked himself) to make sure he hadn't snagged an "ignore me" ward by accident. *But wait, no, he responded to what I had said, so it can't be that.*

"Perhaps if I get closer," pondered the man. He walked over, and Lysanias saw he was actually a bit taller than himself, and much wider. "No, I still do not see the braggart who claims to be able to face me in combat." He looked Lysanias over with distaste. "I see a scrawny half man, and two lovely ladies, but where is the fool who will face me? Come out, coward!"

"No one is fighting you," Celes told him. "We're just passing through."

"Then be gone!" he roared. "And know that had I not recently disgraced my art and my master, your words would have provoked me to great rage. Be thankful you may pass unhindered, unlike the scores of troops sent by the empire to harass me." He turned back and walked over to his spot to return to his contemplation.

"Let's go," Celes suggested, rolling her eyes.

"I agree," Lysanias agreed, not wanting to provoke the man further. *I'm not running away, I'm sure I could take him. But there's no reason for me to do so, right?*

"Wait," pleaded Terra. "You're the reason we haven't seen the empire on the other side of this mountain?"

"That is correct. Scores of them passed this way like the whipped dogs they are, and for the insult of disturbing my meditations I destroyed them! But I would not hurt ladies, or scrawny half men."

"Hey!"

"Oh, have I touched a nerve? Perhaps a bit of exercise wouldn't go amiss in the future if you wished to have a body like mine." He curled his arm, showing muscle.

*Ugh, just don't start kissing it or whatever. Jerk, I worked out with Korra for six months and didn't gain a thing. I don't think I can, I'm stuck like this because of my long sleep. But no, just assume I'm lazy or something.*

"Then we have you to thank," Terra went on. "So thank you. Our journey would have been much harder had those soldiers made it through here."

"The empire has no honor. Please, leave me to my thoughts."

"No."

"No?" he asked dangerously, turning to her.

"I think we need to help each other."

"You? Help me? I don't think so."

"But I do. Tell me about your disgrace to the art."

"I will not. That pain is for me alone to bear."

"I was once commanded to destroy an entire platoon of soldiers just to see if I could. The man that commanded this stood there and laughed as I did so."

"I... I care not. Why do you tell me this?"

"Do you think I don't feel like a disgrace? Like I'm worthless? I do! But I'm not going to stand around on a mountain brooding about it. I'm going to *make up for it.*"

"There would be only one way to-" He glanced at her. "I see."

"Exactly. We go to gain the strength needed to make sure this man never again issues such a command. That he pays for all the lives he's taken. We could use a person like you, and I think you could use us."

"You presume much."

"But not without cause, I think. I take it you're some kind of martial artist?"

He drew himself up taller, if that was possible. "I am."

"Then regain your honor through your art. Help us to put the world right, and throw down the emperor who allows Kefka to run wild through it."

"I wonder if it is so easy?" He stared out a moment longer, and Terra waited patiently by his side. "My master was my father," he finally said. "Who held the title of strongest in the world. His son he trained, and one other. I was the son. But as he grew older he decided to pass the title on. I... misunderstood. I believed he had chosen the other man, and not me, his son. In my rage I struck him down, and upon this very mountain I waited for that man to appear. And appear he did. I attacked, and to my shame he bested me. My father was a fool in the end, the title should have gone to him. But even worse, after he bested me he forgave me. Forgave. *Me.* The man that had killed his master. Betrayed his art. He showed he was the better fighter *and* the better man, all in one stroke. How can I ever look him in the eye again?"

"Maybe you can't," she agreed, laying a hand on his arm. "But standing here you never will. If the answer is to be found, it will be found out there, just as with mine."

"You do have a way with words, young lady," said the man after a moment. "And what of you two?" he roared. "Why do you travel with this one?"

"I was a general in the empire," Celes explained. "But my eyes were finally opened as the atrocities they were willing to commit showed no signs of decreasing. I travel to put an end to them."

"I am what you might call a prophet," Lysanias said honestly. "I see a great

shadow across this land, and I must do what I can to make this world bright again.”

“A prophet? I see. Your eyes are passing strange, I noticed that and wondered if it was a mark of some kind upon you from forces beyond.” He nodded, as if understanding much, while in truth understanding little. “Yes, the world could use more holy men. And where do you head now, oh prophet?”

“A town where we can find more magic users. We need all the help we can get, and magic is a force unlike any other in the world.”

“Magic? Ha!” He turned and seemed to gather himself, then threw a bolt of energy out into the sky. “That is the only power a man should strive for. The power of his own will!”

Lysanias’ eyes were wide. “You have to teach me that!”

He laughed. “Well said! Perhaps you are not such a worthless lump after all.”

“The reason we seek magic is simply *time*,” explained Celes. “Those that can use magic will be strong now. We need that strength, and we need it soon. There isn’t time to train an army of people to be at your level.”

“It has taken many years,” he agreed. “I can see there could be wisdom there. You believe those with the gift of magic may yet be found in this world?”

“He believes it.” She pointed a thumb at Lysanias.

“And you follow him.”

“He rescued me, and I’ve seen what he can do.”

“Did he now? Perhaps there is more to you than I first thought. You have my apologies, then. I am Vargas, what name may I know you by?”

“I am Lysanias, it’s good to meet you.”

“Celes.”

“Terra.”

“Then let us be off,” he said. “I will join you, if my words have not disgusted you beyond all measure.”

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” Terra told him. “Vargas, welcome to the team.”

## Chapter 7

Do you Believe in Magic?

When: No time has passed

Where: The peak of the mountain

With Vargas added to the party and the girl's inventory system, he looked over what he had to work with.

"I would not recommend going through the cave until you are prepared for a fight," he cautioned. "I am sure there are many soldiers inside, waiting their chance to take revenge for their fallen comrades. And I believe they desperately wish to reach the area you came from."

"Can't imagine why," Terra remarked, looking over at Celes.

"Not a clue," she agreed. "It's your call, Terra. You were the one that wanted to come here. Is that feeling you had gone?"

"It is. Though this wasn't exactly what I was expected."

"What were you expecting?" Lysanias asked, hoping to get more information on the phenomenon.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. Something important, but maybe we already missed it."

"You all speak in riddles," Vargas announced. "Are we entering the cave or not?"

The two looked at Terra, who gave her head a final shake. "No. Let's not kill any actual people if we don't have to."

"Then are we to climb this mountain to reach the other side? A suitable challenge for me, but will you others be able to handle it?"

"Actually," broke in Lysainas, "this area is big enough. We could probably launch from here. Unless you girls want to wander around in a circle and get more XP before we move on?"

"Let's just leave before any more troops pour into this area," Celes suggested. "We'll probably get more XP on the other side of the mountain anyway."

"Very well. But I think we can slow them down some in either case. Back away, this should only take a second." He took his stance and willed some slabs of rock out of the ground. One after another they popped up as he seemed to uppercut the air. Then he gave a shove and they went flying towards the cave entrance, piling up in front with a crash. But he wasn't done, and started applying more energy until they started melting together. He then quickly pulled the heat away from them, melting the slabs into a rocky plug. "Let's see them get through that," he announced, turning. *And how much energy would that have taken me otherwise? I'm really going to miss this place.*

"What manner of creature are you?" Vargas demanded, taking a step to be... behind the girls. "You are not just some random prophet, how was this accomplished?"

*Wait, what? Shouldn't he be in front of- never mind.*

"We can tell you the whole story when we're airborne," Terra promised him. "We probably have a long flight ahead."

"Ugh, for the third time," Lysanias groaned. "Going to need to come up a pamphlet or something." He got out the ward that held the balloon currently. "Release." With a burst of air the balloon came into existence, and he started looking the wards over to make sure they were all secure.

"That didn't fit into your inventory, that much is clear. So your boast before was not simply bravado," Vargas finally realized. "There is more to you than meets the eye. Perhaps this will be a worthwhile journey."

"Isn't that true of everyone?" he asked without turning. "I mean sure, your body is all swollen for some reason, but I don't hold that against you. You could be quite intelligent for all I know."

"Swollen?" he demanded, but then looked down at himself. Then he began to chuckle. "Are you to be our jester, as well as our prophet, then?"

"I do what I can. Let's go."

With some trepidation Vargas was coaxed into the basket and the group took off, leaving the mountain behind them.

"This is incredible!" Vargas announced a moment later. They were moving at speed now, heading east, and he was looking excitedly around at the landscape below. Lysanias noticed his death grip on the side of the basket, but wisely chose not to mention it. "To see the world from above in this way. I feel... I feel humbled to be so small. My world was simply my art, my mastery of myself. But there is more, so much more in this world of ours. I have been a fool!"

"We've all made mistakes," Celes told him sadly. "But so long as you realize it, there's hope."

"Indeed. Now, before this sight overwhelms me, please, tell me more about yourselves. I was resigned to being your protector but it seems I may be the one that must work extra hard to catch up to you!" He laughed.

"I need to get a heading now that we're in the air," Lysanias told him. "You girls tell him. I'll join you all shortly."

So while the other two told them about what had happened thus far he got out a sheet of paper and ink, then made a circle on it. He put some lines through it, then numbered them. He stared at his creation for a moment.

*Yeah, why not? It's basically a line connecting our current position to our target position. In the air, with nothing to get in the way, we can just go there directly. This could work, it's one word, just a number. Universe, I ask you this: What rough heading according to this circle brings us to the greatest concentration of magic users?*

With that he got a number, turned the airship in roughly that direction using their current heading as "0" and went back to join the others.

*Nice, that worked. Now that I think about it, that may be a better method than my usual "how many steps" four times. But we'll see.*

Now two days later the airship pulled up to the town his power told them was their destination. They had talked it over, and rather than be subtle about it decided to just land the balloon in the middle of town so there was no question as to their abilities.

"It might avoid misunderstandings, doing it that way right from the start," Vargas had agreed. He was a bit cautious around Lysanias after learning everything he could do, and was looking forward to a demonstration of martial arts from another world.

The others had agreed that was probably for the best, so kids and adults alike stared up in wonder as the group landed, then sprang from the basket.

"Greetings!" Vargas boomed, not a shy one. "Who will join our quest to rid the world of the empire?! Step up now, don't be- eh?"

Everyone looked at him like he was nuts, and a little boy wandered over.

"I like your... What is that?" he pointed.

"That's our travel balloon. I like it too," Terra told him. She knelt down. "What's your name?"

"I'm Yertza. Did you travel far?"

"Pretty far." She looked back at Lysanias, and he excitedly nodded. *This kid has MP. Not much, but it's there.*

"Yertza come here this instant," said a woman, rushing over there and grabbing him. "We don't talk to strangers."

*Her too. Much more. Two magic users already?*

"We mean no harm," Celes told her. "We're here to seek magic users to help in our plans to overthrow the emperor."

"Magic?" scoffed the woman, somewhat nervously. "There hasn't been magic in the world in generations!"

"That's right," said another man, walking up. "So just take your weird flying machine and leave immediately!"

*Him too. Three so far.* He caught Terra's eye and put three fingers out. She nodded.

"We are not leaving until we've said what we've come here to say," Vargas told him, stepping over to be in his face.

“Uh, Vargas, perhaps antagonizing a town full of magic users isn’t the best policy,” Terra cautioned. “We want these people to help us, not start shooting spells at us.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps I am a bit exuberant sometimes. My apologies, good man.” He stuck out a hand.

“There’s no magic users here,” insisted the man, taking a step back and looking at the proffered arm as though it would bite him.

“The prophet that travels with us says differently.”

“The who?”

Vargas hauled Lysanias to the front, as he had been cowering a bit behind everyone. “This man.”

“Odd eyes.”

“I know. Look, sir, maybe you don’t even know you can do magic, but you have MP. She has MP. The child has MP. In fact I’d wager most everyone around here has MP.”

“That’s preposterous! There’s no magic in the-”

Lysanias held up a hand, a flame balanced there.

“-in the...”

“Fire!” Terra cast, and a burst of flame appeared in the square next to the balloon.

“-the...”

“Ice!” Celes cast, and a burst of cold took its place.

“Oh dear.”

“What’s all this?” yelled a new voice, and an older man tottered up to them. “Who’s doing magic around here? What’s this contraption? Who are these people?”

“Are you the village elder?” asked Celes.

“I represent this village, yes. Who are you, disrupting our lives here?”

“Please sir, we need your help,” pleaded Terra. “Can you at least listen to our request? We know you can use magic, it’s vital for the safety of the world that you hear us out.”

“Oh, you know that, do you? Wait, do I know you?” He looked her over. “Odd, you seem familiar to me. Never mind, how do you claim to know what you know?”

“I can sense it,” Lysanias told them. “Given a few minutes I could tell you who had the most MP and who had the least MP around here. Even line them up in order. I can see why you would want to hide your abilities, given the state of the world today, but our need is very great.”

He looked them over, his fuming becoming less pronounced. “I suppose if you can all use magic, I better find out how. And how you came to know about us. Did someone slip up, is that it?” He looked around at the assembled people, as a small crowd had started gathering around the group.

“No one from this village let your secret out,” Terra assured him. “We have ways of finding things out.”

“I suppose you must. Very well.” He turned. “We’re having a council meeting, everyone else clear out!”

Several people remained, men and woman, and the older man gestured to a building nearby. “We’ll head over there.”

“Thank you,” Lysanias said, pulling a ward out. He stuck it to the balloon, sucking it inside, and put the ward in the dispenser again.

“Magic done openly in the streets,” the man grumped. “What is the world coming to?”

So the group sat around a table and told the story, about how the empire was reaching further and further lately. They didn’t mention the shadow avatar, having decided to keep it simple. *Besides, this Kefka is probably the avatar here so it’s the same thing.* The members of the council talked but from the sentiment, no help from this place was coming.

“You have to understand,” said the council leader at least. He had given his name as Topeze and he seemed genuinely sorry about what he was about to say. “It’s fine for you, using magic. The empire knows about you, and how you got your magic. It’s easily explained, and hard to repeat. But us? If we went up against them, even far from this place, someone would see that person using magic. If that information got back to the emperor many uncomfortable questions would be raised. Questions we’ve spent generations making sure

*never get asked.* You think we want to become breeding stock for the world?"

"You're not afraid of the empire," Vargas reasoned. "We could stand together and defeat them I'm sure. You're afraid of what comes after."

"If people learned we've had magic since the days of the Magi war? Who knows what they might do? Better to just be left alone, here in our remote corner of the world. But if airships are starting to be built..."

"The principals are easy enough to figure out, I'm surprised you don't have them," Lysanias told the man. *But then I was surprised to find Korra's world didn't have guns, so what do I know about it?*

"So our journey was wasted?" Vargas asked sourly.

"Not entirely," he decided. "We have a selection of Relics and equipment for sale here. I will speak to the shop owner and have them offer you a substantial discount. I doubt you would find anyplace else that would do that."

"Relics? I've heard that term before but only in passing. What are you talking about?" asked Lysanias.

"Magical items, essentially," Celes told him. "Their making has been lost, but their powers persist to this day. Hence the term Relic. Usually quite expensive, for obvious reasons."

"Ah!" *So imbued items? We could pick up some imbued items? Fantastic!*

"Yes. Honestly we've just had them sitting around, as most are combat oriented. The bulk of them were made for the war, naturally. So those are the most common types."

"We don't have any, so we'll take whatever you can sell us," Celes told him. "Thanks for at least hearing us out."

"Of course. Feel free to stay at the inn, travel the lands near the town if you want to raise your levels. Just don't mention magic and we'll be happy to have you as long as you want. Our town is rather remote, we'd love to hear some stories about what's been going on in the world lately."

*And we have a person from beyond the world, a person with no experience, an ex-general, and a disgraced martial artist to tell them. Brilliant! We won't have any bias.*

Celes insisted they visit the Relic shop first, and the store owner perked up considerably when they came in. Naturally it wasn't a Relic *shop*, as why would these people be buying combat Relics? So it was a combination Relics, items, weapons, and armor plus general store and Topeze said it was okay to sell to these people at a discount as the town would make up the difference.

"Are you sure that's legal?" asked the store owner.

"Who is going to know way out here?"

"Oh, you break the law and the merchant's guild will find you. Don't underestimate those people, they're ruthless!"

"I'll take full responsibility," said Topeze.

"Yes, you will," he muttered. "So what can I get you?"

To say the group went on a "shopping binge" would be putting it mildly, as each first picked out some Relics suited to their style of attack. Vargas picked up a Black Belt and Running Shoes, the belt allowing him to counter attack without it being his turn. The shoes simply accelerated him so his turn came around faster. "I'll take four turns for every one before," he chortled. The girls each took a pair of earrings, which the shopkeeper said would increase the power of their magic quite significantly. Lysanias asked why they didn't also get Running Shoes, but apparently two Relics was the limit in this world. (Each earring counted as one, and raised magic damage separately) After that they just plain didn't work, either due to interfering magic or the fact their age just weakened them to the point they could only do so much for a single person. Lysanias, however, had a bit more of a difficult choice to make.

"So this ring will make me totally immune to magic," he repeated, holding a thick golden ring up to look it over. "And send the spell cast against me *back* at the person that cast it?"

“Yes, but it’ll hurt you more than help,” the shopkeeper explained. “You won’t be able to be cured, and how many things in the world attack with magic?”

“I’m just concerned about the one, Kefka. And curing... Well, you leave me to worry about that.” *Their cure magic doesn’t work on me anyway, so I’m all set. Plus in my travels I bet a lot of things use magic, so I’m thinking beyond this world as well.*

“I guess if you want to rely on potions. There are two weaknesses you should watch out for.”

“Oh?”

“Magic can only be reflected once. So if your opponent has one of these and casts on themselves...”

“It hits you anyway. I see.”

“Only at half strength though.”

“That’s a plus. What’s the second?”

“Some magic can’t be blocked. If it would hit everyone in the party all at once, rather than just being cast on multiple targets, it’ll get through.”

“Probably too diffuse or something? Are there many spells like that?”

He shook his head. “At least, not that I know of.”

“So it may never come up. I’ll be careful though, thanks. Now tell me about this “Sniper” Sight. What’s a sniper?”

“We have no idea, that’s just the name it’s always had.”

“I see. And it’ll make my physical attacks *undodgeable*?”

“You’ll have 100% hit rate, that’s right.”

*How are these people not ruling the planet? All this stuff is crazy powerful!* “It’s these Sprint Shoes that really interest me, though.” He picked them up off the counter lovingly.

“Er, what? They just double your speed. Who cares? That’s why they’re so cheap. Popular with kids but what good are they? The Running Shoes your buddy picked out are more useful for combats. You would rather have double speed over 50% turn time?”

“I can think of some uses, believe me.” *Plus I’m not sure what “turn time” means for me. Would I really be faster in combat? I’m already pretty fast, thanks to absorbing all that skill from dozens of martial artists. Well, five or six anyway. I don’t seem to be lagging behind the others in combat. And I could always come back.*

“I mean the Dragon Boots are far more useful. Jumping meters into the air? I mean come on, that’s pretty fun.”

“True. But I can only wear two, I’m not sure which of the three I want to go for. They all seem really useful.”

“Tell you what, you still haven’t even looked at armor or weapons, right? Make a pile, add it up, I’ll probably wind up tossing these in for free. You can always switch back and forth, right? This is the most money I’ve made in a year, our policy of not selling anything to anyone not really conducive to business, you know what I mean?”

“I could see that.”

“And supposedly you are trying to save the world... But honestly I think the mayor is just trying to bribe you. You know, ‘we gave you a good deal on stuff now go away and don’t tell anyone’ sort of deal.”

“Yeah, I get that sense. I understand, really.”

“I hope so. Now, can I interest you ladies in some new armor?”

In the end the group picked out a huge pile of stuff, and set their current gear next to it as well as some extra items they had to try and offset the cost. “I don’t know,” said the shopkeeper. “Even with a discount you’re fairly short.”

“We’re going to wander around, see what sort of XP we get in this area,” Celes told him. “We’ll make some money as well.”

“You want to take items before you’ve paid? Lady, that’s called theft!”

“What if we gave you something we’ll have to come back for,” Lysanias offered, holding up a hand.

“You mean as collateral? I guess I could accept that. What did you have in mind?”

“This.” He brought out the ward that held the balloon. “You didn’t see us arrive, but this

is how we got here. Inside is the balloon we used. We can't leave without it."

"Prove it!"

"Fine." So he did, outside, naturally.

"Well!" The man looked the balloon over. "That's some collateral. This will fly through the air with you in it? You really will come back for this!"

"That's right. Tie it up in back or I can put it in another ward, so you can hide it in a place only you know. Just please don't lose it."

"You nuts? You'd kill me and burn my shop to the ground. And then resurrect me and kill me again! I'll keep an eye on it. But yeah, put it away I don't want someone stealing it either."

*Wait, we'll what? He must be joking.* "Fine."

"The stuff is yours. I'll add up your bill so you know how much to raise."

"Leave us a little for the Inn tonight," Celes told the group. "We'll have to get started in the morning. I'm not fighting monsters out there in the dark."

"That's a good idea," Lysanias agreed. "In the meantime, I can show you what I have planned for those shoes!"

## Chapter 8

A Bolt in the Dark

When: Moments later

Where: Outside the Relic shop

“So what about these shoes has you so excited?” Vargas asked. “I really do think mine are the superior pair.”

“That’s because you don’t know what I know. There’s a technique I’ve been waiting to learn, it requires absolute mastery of a person’s ability to manipulate their inner energies. I know you don’t know what that means because it seems you don’t have that like I do, but just accept it for the moment. I diligently acquired this technique, both through my eyes and through my own hard work. What I didn’t realize is that to use the technique I needed to be faster, as well. The spirit I was working with to learn the technique told me I *was* faster, but couldn’t explain why I didn’t actually move like they thought I should. With these shoes on I should be fast enough to use the technique.”

“You would rely on a Relic?” he sneered.

“May I remind you of the almost giddy anticipation you had for using *your* new Relics in battle?”

“You may not. Besides, I have mastered my techniques, these Relics simply enhance me.”

“Maybe if I wear these for a time I’ll figure out what that spirit meant. They said I needed to stop holding myself back, whatever that means.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t know! Anyway, your two items are strictly combat focused, this wouldn’t do me much good in combat because monsters just sort of stand there. At least in this world. So I would only wear it when I needed... wait. Why does one earring count as one Relic, but I have to wear both those shoes and the pair counts as one Relic. I could wear another, but Terra and Celes can’t.”

“Bored now!” called Celes. “Are you showing us or not?”

“Sorry, didn’t realize you had the attention span of a cat. Okay, here we go.” *Zeleafu said I was moving my energy properly, so let’s try this.* He stepped and suddenly found himself fifteen meters from where he had been.

“That’s it?” Celes called to him. “Are you sure you didn’t just teleport? Because it looked like a-”

He stepped again and was beside her. “Nope.”

“Ga!!”

He chuckled and stepped back. “No, teleporting is fairly hard on me, and slow. This was meant for combat. At least the kind of combat where you don’t stand in one place all the time. If I can get some practice in, I might be able to step and strike as a single movement. Appearing beside my opponent and striking before they can even react.”

“I must admit, I wouldn’t mind learning a technique like that if I could,” Vargas admitted.

“I don’t know how I would tell you what to do, given you don’t seem to have spiritual energy like I do. I’m sorry. I’ve taught people before, I’d be glad to teach you.”

“Perhaps you will find a way. I am going to do my daily exercises, we have been cooped up in that balloon of yours for too long. I will see you for dinner.” He went to go do push ups or whatever in private.

“I think it’s great,” Terra told him. “I’m glad you’re able to use the technique you were striving for.”

“Thanks, Terra. I just wish I had some insight as to what that spirit was talking about.”

He was still brooding about it that night at dinner, having pulled the shoes off to look them over. *They are magical in nature, I can feel it. And apparently at least a thousand years old, given they haven’t had magic for at least that long. So they must be fabricated or the equivalent on this world. Or maybe stuff just doesn’t break down here, that’s possible right? I thought I would feel something, and while it felt great being that fast, I’m still no closer to an answer. Stop holding myself back, they said. How could I be doing that?* He looked over at

Terra, who was laughing and talking with Celes. *Is she holding herself back? I don't think so. She's got it so easy. She just has to figure out her place in this world. Me, I have to find my place in a world, save it, and then move on to another one. Will I ever get back home, or will I simply move from world to world forever? It's a worthwhile existence, don't get me wrong. And I can always stop in to see my friends from time to time. Show them what I've been doing, bring them things from other realities. But I would know the shadow avatar is out there, tearing worlds apart. It would pull at me, I couldn't stand still and let that happen. Couldn't... stand still...*

He sat up, an idea coming to him.

*My identity gift. I never figured out what it was. I always thought maybe it was being a shield, like I told Jinora. But that never fit, I never was able to project an energy barrier or harden my skin. What if it's more fundamental than that? What if my purpose is to move? To go from reality to reality like I'm doing now, and my speed is tied to that? Stop holding myself back. Stop thinking I'll ever have a normal life, settle down and have kids. There are worlds to save, and I can't stop running until I've saved them all.*

"I'll be right back," Lysanias told the others, slamming his fork down. "I've just had a thought."

"Whatever," Celes told him.

"Train well," Vargas agreed.

Terra just looked thoughtful and got up a second after the door was closed to see what he was up to.

Lysanias stood there, shoes in hand, wondering what came next. *There's no big flash of light and trumpets, those that found their identity gift just said one day they realized something important about themselves and there it was. If speed really is my gift, and I accept that my purpose is to travel across realities and save them, and my speed represents that... this should work. What else would represent endless running across worlds? If I'm right I should be able to spirit step without the shoes. My speed should be supernaturally augmented, like Esther said she could just will herself to become an animal because she loved animals so much. He set the shoes down. So let's do this. If it means saving worlds, letting people like Korra and Terra live their lives the way they want, instead of becoming a part of the shadow avatar, so be it. I'll do it. I'll run to them all, and I'll be their shield as best I can. Now!*

He found himself much further from his starting point than he had before, and let out a laugh. *It worked. I discovered my identity gift. It's speed. Swiftness of foot, and probably of wing too. But for now, let's try something. Good thing this town has a fairly open center section like this.* He stepped back, then picked the shoes up again, slipping them on. This time he went to the very edge of town, and he had never felt so light. *I am moving faster, even just walking around I can't help myself. This is great!* With a smile he stepped, and almost fell over. He flailed his arms in a most comical manor and grabbed a nearby tree so he didn't fall over. *What the? Huh, guess I need some more practice. I was wondering why I kept doing that perfectly, it wasn't in character for me. Don't worry, nobody saw that.* He tried again, this time going from one end of the town to the other.

*Okay, that's pretty fast. At some point I'll need to see if I can do this while flying, and how much distance I can cover in one "flap." But I'll hold off for now.*

"You did it without the shoes," Terra told him as he jogged back to the inn. "I saw you."

"I did," he admitted proudly. "Wait... You saw?"

"Saw?"

"How much did you see?" His eyes narrowed.

"Not you flailing around and grabbing a tree, if that's what you're asking," she replied innocently.

He sighed. "I figured out what the spirit meant. It wasn't so much holding myself back, it was accepting something about myself."

"Like what?"

"What I'm meant to do. Travel, see new worlds, meet interesting people. Save them. You know, the usual."

"I see. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. It's nice to know, hard to say how knowing will help me around here, but we'll see. Is there any of that pie left?"

"I think Vargas was going to finish it off."

"Noooooo!"

The group spent the next day killing monsters and such around town, for XP and shinies. These flowed like water after a whole day so the shopkeeper was more than pleased with the sack of gold they sat upon the counter, and he released their ship back to them. During the day Terra had learned the spell *Life* while Celes learned *Scan* so she went around viewing the stats of all the monsters in the area, which also showed their weaknesses. This helped kill them even faster.

*I'm almost afraid to ask what the life spell does. Didn't that shopkeeper say something about being resurrected and then being killed again? Is death not permanent here? That's an unnatural thought. I wouldn't mind that scan spell though, she looked like she was having fun with it.*

They stayed the night, deciding only to decide what to do the next day, though Celes reminded them that pretty much her grandfather Cid was their only hope of really disrupting the empire.

Lysanias awoke to a strange sight, and the others noticed it immediately as well. It was a balloon, a red balloon, hanging there in the center of the room. Attached to the string was a ball that looked made of cardboard and painted (rather badly) and attached to that was a string with a sign that read "pull me."

The group got ready for the day, ate breakfast, and generally tried to ignore the balloon because none of them had heard of helium so no one knew what was keeping it up there. But finally they could put it off no longer and Vargas, bravest of them all, marched up to the thing and gave the string a mighty tug.

The ball opened, there was an explosion of confetti that coated the room in glittery goodness, and another note fell out of the ball.

Vargas coughed. "It's in my teeth," he complained, looking like he was a glitter yeti. Being the closest he was completely covered with the stuff.

"It's in my hair!" complained Terra, trying to shake her hair out.

"It's in my everything," complained Celes, trying to shake her shirt out.

"I think it's for me," Lysanias told them, blinking glitter out of his eyes. He walked over and yes, there was a picture of Inari holding her thumb and pinky finger up to the side of her face for some bizarre reason. Scrawled across the picture was "call me!" "Yup. Sorry about that, everyone."

"Who's going to clean this up?" the innkeeper demanded. "I heard a noise and came running. My room is a disaster!"

"I'll mention it," Lysanias promised him, taking the white marble in hand. He put energy into it and the familiar image of Inari appeared in the air before him. She was wearing scant clothing and performing some kind of exercises as people on a tiny screen before her did the same. "One two! One two! One two!" they chanted. Her tail bounced back and forth as she lunged and swooped.

"Who is that?" Vargas asked, eyes bouncing in time to the tail moving.

"My patron saint, the lady Inari. Ahem?"

She gave a little shriek and turned, making a show of covering herself though she was totally decent. She didn't do it to draw attention to various parts of her, no, why would she do that?

"Took you long enough!" she chided, "I sent that balloon days ago!"

"We got it this morning," he told her. "And did you have to fill it with this glitter stuff? It's everywhere."

"Really, just this morning? Odd? Did I mess my temporal coordinates up by that much? Or did it arrive just when it needed to? Can I work any more rhetorical questions into this conversation? Did you say glitter?"

"Yes, glitter. Can't you see it?"

She peered through the window, not bothering to pretend to cover herself anymore. "I must have used the self replicating stuff by accident, there shouldn't have been that much. I'm sure it'll take care of itself. Now, the reason for my call."

"I called you."

"My message then. How are you, by the way?"

"Fine."

"I see you've moved on from Korra's world, and you've found some pretty girls to hang around on this one. Good, good. You'll need them. What was I saying? Oh right, you're at the magic user's town, right?"

"Yes, we got here yesterday."

"Then you're nearby someplace I'd like you to check out for me. There was a definite *event* there some time ago, I think checking it out will be beneficial for you."

"How, exactly? This isn't another one of your little jokes, is it? And by the way, did you send a singer to me in the last world?"

"Who can recall? But this is no joke. Something from another world fell into that one nearby. It could be a fish tank. Or a half eaten jelly bean. On the other hand it could be a person, or a weapon of great power. Only going to see will tell you."

"Things just do that? Fall across realities?"

"Not often. But it does happen. That's what makes this worth checking out. If it happened every other day who would care? But it doesn't."

"I see what you mean. Where do we have to go?"

"Straight north. You'll come to an island shaped like a triangle. You'll have to take it from there."

"If it's an island it shouldn't be that hard to search."

"That's the spirit. Good luck!"

"See you later."

The image vanished. "I guess it's time for a side quest?" Celes asked.

"Are we actually doing what she suggested?" Terra asked.

"Can you introduce us?" Vargas asked.

"OH!" the girls intoned together. "Somebody has a *crush!* Somebody has a *crush!*" they singsonged and laughed.

"No, it's just, she's a being from beyond our world. She looked strong. I do not!"

"He's a tail chaser," Terra teased when she recovered, wiping her eyes.

"Is that it, you want a piece of that tail?" Celes added, swishing her butt.

"Stop it, that's totally inappropriate- help me out here Lysanias." But he just shook his head and went to get the balloon ready. "Come on!"

It took two and a half days for the triangular island to come into view, and in that time Lysanias had experimented with the shoes in flight. It didn't matter if he was walking or not, his speed seemed doubled, and on or off he could now fly rings around the balloon. Spirit stepping while flying propelled him over 200m at a time, not that he knew the exact measurement. This put him at about 200km/hour (125miles/hour) while not stepping. All he knew is that he was *fast*.

The group landed on the island and looked around, not seeing anything the least bit interesting. It was fairly small, maybe three miles to the side with a rocky portion stuck up in the middle. A few sparse trees dotted the place, but that was it.

"We came all this way for this?" Vargas demanded. "There's nothing here."

"I'm inclined to agree," Celes agreed. "We should have been heading south but now we've just come further north again."

"Maybe whatever is here is in the water," suggested Lysanias. "I might finally be able to put my ability to suspend my breathing to use."

"Or you can get the balloon ready, not make any sudden moves, and we can leave this place very, very quickly," Terra suggested.

"What? Why?" Everyone looked over at what she was looking at, and then there was a tiny bit of panic.

Rising out of the ground was basically a tube of flesh with a row of teeth. *They have*

*giant worms here, too? But I think this one's a bit bigger than the one I encountered back home.*

The form reared up, pulsing and waving its teeth. Everyone had their weapons in hand, they were clearly in combat, and the thing seemed to look them over. It settled on Lysanias.

"Why is it looking at meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee...," he started to say, but was suddenly sucked into the mouth of the creature by an irresistible force.

*Well, I'm dead.*

*\*Thump\**

*Ow. Wait, I'm not dead! Yay!*

...

*What's that?*

*"Yaaaaaaaaa!" \*thump\* "Ow!"*

*"Ow. Terra?"*

*"Lysanias? Is that you? It's pitch black in here."*

*"We have to stop meeting like this."*

"Hehehe, ow, it hurts to laugh, jerk. Cure!" As the magical energy swirled around her it lit the space up, then faded. "That's better. Where are we?"

"I don't know, you fell on top of me before I could look around."

"Oh right. Sorry." She moved off, sitting up beside him.

As Lysanias put a flame out the other two joined him and were healed, then started looking around.

"What was that creature?" asked Vargas. "Is that what we were sent there to find?"

"Are we inside of it? This looks more like a cave," Celes questioned.

"I'm more worried about getting out," Terra told them nervously.

"We can't have passed out of the world," Lysanias assured her. "I can just teleport us back to the balloon. As long as I envision myself in the basket, it won't matter where in the world it is or where we are. I'll just go there."

"I guess. This place gives me the creeps."

"So let's not spend any more time here than we must. Forward!" Vargas shouted.

Then the attacks began.

"These creatures are extremely strong," Vargas complained after a particularly hard battle. "My advanced techniques are really getting a workout."

"My magic doesn't seem to be doing much damage," Celes complained. "Even stuff that should be weak to fire, we can barely scratch it. And that's with double earrings!"

"I don't think we should be here," Terra agreed. "I really hope it's worth it. I'm down to half MP."

"I could call a spirit," offered Lysanias. "At least we don't get attacked while standing still. My mountain spirit is helping but I agree, we're a bit in over our heads in here."

"We'll have to think of something, we can't keep this up," Celes agreed.

"All right, give me a few minutes." He chanted a few minutes and a vague form appeared before them, more like wind given form than a creature like Zeleafu. It radiated surprise, but didn't speak. They could hardly see it in the darkness, but it hovered there and made no move to attack.

"Can you help us?" Lysanias asked it. It stared at him. "I don't think you have spirits like my last world," he decided. "I think it'll help, but we'll have to get into another fight to be sure."

"We'll have to anyway," Vargas told them. "Come, there look to be some bridges over there. That's a good sign, right?"

The spirit took some of the pressure off the group, adding another attack and drawing attacks away from them. Being a part of this world it could do respectable damage, and seemed to act independently of Lysanias when in combat. For his part, Lysanias tried to get creative, throwing multiple bending attacks at single targets, which helped. Luckily the cave wasn't that big, and they didn't need to cover all of it. There were treasure chests lying around but Lysanias could just metal bend them over, they didn't need to physically stand in front of

them.

“A fake mustache?” Vargas said as one was opened. “Really?”

“Are you sure this whole place isn’t a big joke by that Inari character?” Celes asked.

“The armor was decent, you put it on immediately,” Lysanias protested. “In fact after taking one look at it you grabbed it, made claws with your fingers and hissed like a cat, then refused to move until you had put it on. It can’t be.”

“I think you’re just imagining things. There’s no way I did all that. There’s another one there, see what’s in that.”

“It’s a paintbrush,” he told her, zipping the chest over to them and popping it open. He held it out.

“Now I know we’re being pranked somehow,” Vargas complained. But they put it in inventory just the same.

“Come on.”

The next room scared the crap out of everybody as the ceiling suddenly smashed down in front of them and then retracted again.

“My goodness that scared me,” Terra admitted, hand over her chest. “My heart is racing.”

\*Wham\*

“How are we going to get through this?” Celes asked.

\*Wham\*

“Easy,” Lysanias told them.

\*Wham\*

As it fell he punched the solid rock in front of him, chopping off a block of it. This stayed there as the ceiling went up again, so he shoved it forward. The ceiling now smashed into this but didn’t get all the way down, Lysanias dug in and willed another piece off, the bit atop the first piece. He melted them together and shoved them a second time, then kept shoving it forward as they walked. There was plenty of room for them to stand up, so apart from the assault on their ears the room was easily cleared. They even found some more treasure, a ring and a cape of some kind.

“Ah, now this is more like it. Pity we have no one to wear it,” Vargas told them, holding up the ring they found next.

“Perhaps my mountain spirit can wear it? Elemental damage seems treated as magic here, and you say this increases magical damage. Why wouldn’t it increase their damage just as easily as ours?”

“Give it a try.” He handed it over.

*I’d still like to know what makes the ceiling go up and down like that. Are we inside the beast? Is that some kind of stomach, grinding stuff up to be digested further on? But there’s no liquid here, how would the bits... You know what, I’m not going to think about it.*

The next room held more treasure, and as the group was getting fairly worn down by this time Lysanias just winged it. He flew above the bridges and found the other side, then just teleported the group there. Naturally he pilfered the treasures, and got a very decent shield (according to Celes) which she claimed immediately.

“But you took the armor!” Terra protested. “Doesn’t the rest of the party get a share of the loot?”

“You can have the brush and the mustache, isn’t that enough?”

“I think you know it’s not.”

“Oh, all right. That was selfish of me, I guess. Go ahead, take it.” She handed it over.

“Thank you.”

And finally they stood before a person sitting there glumly in a tiny room, looking very out of place in colorful clothing. They sadly looked up at the group standing there, and blinked a few times. “Huh,” they said, looking at Celes. “Interesting,” they said, looking at Terra. “Okay,” they said looking at Vargas. “Strange,” they said looking at the spirit and the spirit.

“Oh my!” they said looking at Lysanias, and grinned a very big grin. “Marry me!”

## Chapter 9

### An Equipment Story

When: After being proposed to

Where: Weird cave? Creature's stomach? Who knows?

"I'm not really ready to get married right now," Lysanias protested as the figure got up.

"Pity," they replied. "That's a real shame. I only mention it because you seem to have lots of powers. Oh, so many powers. I mean how do you even have that many powers? Where do you keep them?"

"Er..."

"Now just one moment," Vargas stepped in. "Just who are you, and how do you know that?"

"Name's Gogo, nice to meet you! As for how I know, well, I'm a Miruku."

"A what?" asked Terra.

"A Miruku. Look, I don't want to shock any of you, but..." their voice dropped to a whisper. "I think I came from another world!" They nodded really fast.

"Yeah, we know," Celes told them.

"We know," Vargas agreed.

"Lysanias came from another world, that's old news," Terra told them. "You're going to have to try much harder if you want to shock us."

"Humm, yes, yes," Gogo had put their hand on their chin and was nodding. "Of course, another one. That explains every- *What do you mean he's from another world?* Being from another world is crazy, there's no way that's possible!"

"You just said you were!" Vargas insisted.

"Yes, but I was properly reacting to the news, as was proper. Propo, I call it."

"What nonsense are you- Lysanias, let us leave this strange place and this strange being behind. There is no help for us here! We are weakened, low on items, we will not survive a return trip. Let us go your way and be done with this place."

Suddenly they vanished and reappeared in front of the cave entrance. "Wait! Please, you're here to save me, right?"

"Hey, he can teleport!" Terra said, delighted.

"Uh, that's a girl," Celes whispered to her. "I know it's dark but..."

"No, he's a boy!"

"She's a girl!"

"Ladies, please, you're both right."

"You stay out of it!" both shouted, but then did a double take. "Wait, what?" asked Terra.

"I'm both. It's fairly common among my people. Probably because of our abilities, but who can say?"

"Look, we're not leaving you, whatever or whoever you are, so let's just get back," Lysanias said. "Back into the light and we can properly introduce ourselves."

"Lead the way! It's been hours or days or even months since I got here," Gogo explained. "I couldn't leave because I discovered that walking around in here got me attacked by weird creatures. I was able to fight them off by stealing their power but it was a near thing. I didn't want to go too far and get killed. So I've just been hoping something would happen before I starved down here."

"I'll teleport us out," Lysanias offered. "I can probably lift you all, if you all put your armor and stuff away. It doesn't seem to have weight in your inventory but it does when you wear it."

"I'll help," Gogo offered. "I'll just mimic your teleport, that'll take me wherever you're going. That way I can carry someone, or maybe two? I look a bit stronger than you, no offense."

"None taken."

"Are we going to trust this... person?" Vargas asked, pulling Lysanias to the side. "Do you know what a Miruku is?"

"No idea. But we found who we were supposed to. A person that fell through to this

reality, or maybe got sucked up by that creature outside and they came here. Who knows. But they don't belong here so let's at least send them to Inari so she can send them back home."

He glared at Gogo, who innocently stared back. "Fine. But I'll be watching them."

Lysanias took hold of Terra and Gogo took hold of Vargas and Celest. "And you're sure about this?" he asked.

"Completely. If I don't show up there, you can always come back here, right? I'm teleporting with your power, I can't get out otherwise. You think I would have stayed here if I could have done this earlier?"

"Good point. On three. One. Two. Three." He *shifted*.

The group found themselves outside, and Gogo looked around eagerly. "What a tiny island," they remarked. "How did you ever find me?"

"We got a tip from the being that sent me here," Lysanias told them. "Let's get going before that creature comes back."

"Agreed! What is that?" They pointed to the balloon.

"My airship."

"That's an- not a lot of technology around here, is there?"

"No, not really."

"Ah. But there is magic. Interesting. And it really flies?"

"We flew here in it."

"Sorry, I know you're probably proud of it and everything but when you come from a place with spacecraft and computers and skyscrapers and everything this looks sort of, uh, rickety."

"You're welcome to stay here," Vargas told them.

"Nope, I go where you go, amigo! Let's gogo!"

So the group squeezed into the basket and took off, heading up for the moment as they had no destination at the moment.

"Now, your story, if you please," Vargas demanded.

"Sure thing. I went to bed some time ago snug in my own room, and when I woke up I was in that cave. I thought maybe I had made someone angry with me, or one of my buddies was playing a prank. You know, dumping me on some backwater world with no higher technology than a plow or something. Just to see how I would handle it, you know? With no communicator I couldn't call for help, but I soon realized I wasn't on my world anymore in the first place. By the way do you have anything to drink? Or eat? This is going to take a while and like I said it's been I don't know how long since I had anything."

They got some food and water, and started chowing down.

"Thanks. As I was saying, I couldn't call for help so I couldn't have anyone pick me up. So I was stuck. Then you guys came along. You really saved me, so thanks for that!"

"Do you know what they're talking about?" Vargas asked Lysanias.

"I think so. Instead of traveling between one world and another in a different reality, they have machines that can help them to within the same reality."

Gogo spit all over themselves. "What do you mean, different reality? I'm not just on some backwater world someplace?"

"Afraid not."

"That's why all the weird monsters out of nowhere. But if this isn't even my reality, how am I going to get back?"

*Strange, have they heard of the concept before? They seemed to accept that pretty fast.*

"You can leave when I do," Lysanias told them. "Or I can call the person that sent me here, she can probably get you home."

"You mean like traveling between stars?" Celes asked, still trying to process all this.

"Yes, exactly. Spaceships, like I said. I take it you can't do that?"

"I never even considered it! How would you even... get up... there?" She looked up at the sky.

"Ah. That figures. So yeah, here I am. Another reality. Wild. So what are you all up to? Why did *you* come here? There must be something you're after, if you're a reality traveler."

"I'm trying to fight the avatar of shadow. It wants to darken the world and take all the energy of this reality for itself."

"Darkbolt," Gogo spat. "You're talking about Darkbolt? Did we come from the same reality originally?"

"I doubt it, having never heard of a Miruku." *And the fact my world doesn't have any more technology than around here, by the looks of things. More magic though.* "It has different names, apparently."

"No, no, Darkbolt is the name of the demon of darkness. See, on my wor- in my reality there's a bunch of powerful demons, right? Evil, war, destruction, and so on. They all got sealed into orbs and locked away. But of course some idiot had to go and let them out again. Darkbolt, when they came back out this time, was different. Changed. My reality has been fighting them ever since. I've heard of parties traveling to other worlds to collect energy to help us fight, but I always thought it was, you know, just other worlds. But maybe it was to other places, like this? Guess I misunderstood, or they weren't clear. I mean we've known other realities exist forever, some people's powers can take them there and back. I just didn't consider them to be, I don't know, resource rich enough to bother with. If our own powers can't fight back against Darkbolt, how is someone else's, right? But now there aren't too many of us left, actually. It's too bad..."

"What, people?" Vargas asked. "Has this Darkbolt killed so many?"

"No. Miruku. We're special. And yes, Darkbolt has killed uncountable people." They looked sad.

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Terra told them.

"Thanks. Everyone's lost someone by now."

"How are you special?" asked Terra. "You said Miruku like it explained everything."

"To someone from where I'm from, it would. We only have one power. Most people have all sorts of powers, right? But we just get the one. The ability to use the powers of those around us. Magic, spirit stuff, you name it. That's how I knew what powers you had, I can tell just by feeling them out when I look at someone."

"That's either totally innocuous or incredibly terrifying," Vargas decided.

"Sure. Alone we're just people. If someone has mostly immunities or a power like the one I'm using now to talk to you all, who cares?"

"You're using that ability of mine?" Lysanias asked. *I don't even feel it being taken. Would I? How does that even work?*

"Sure! How would I understand you, otherwise? But put us next to people with some nice abilities, and suddenly we can mix and match and come up with something really special."

"That's why you wanted to marry Lysanias here," Terra deduced. "So you could stick by him and always have his powers to draw off of."

"That's right. So, you're fighting Darkbolt, or your local version of it. Didn't know it could be fought, not successfully. I wish you luck."

"Something must have taken your demon over," Lysanias explained. "Made it that way. It can only work with what the reality has to offer. Because it was so powerful to begin with, that's why you're having so much trouble. What I call the shadow avatar works through a form of possession, you have to kill the body to drive it out. Hopefully nothing as powerful as your Darkbolt exists here, and we can kill whoever it has taken over here."

"Ha, I don't think Darkbolt *can* be killed, so just picking something mortal here would be a step in the right direction. Well, count me in. If we can stop it here, maybe that'll give me some ideas on how to stop it at home. Or maybe there will be some magic around here I could bring back, that it's never seen before. Who knows what might turn the tide, now that I think about it!"

"Only one problem," Celes grumbled. "We're at our limit."

"What, weight limit?" they asked. "It's flying fine. And I'm sure I could-"

"No, no, our party limit."

Lysanias and Gogo looked at each other while the others nodded.

"At least you look as confused as I feel," Gogo allowed.

"I think it's an XP thing, don't even ask. But I guess I'm going to have to. What's the

'party limit' and why have we reached it?"

"We can only have four people in combats. Now we have five. Someone would have to sit them out."

"That sounds made up," Gogo told her. "If you don't want me around..."

"It's not that. I think if you can use monster powers too, you could be a great asset to the team. But math is math!"

"Riiight," they drawled. "Why don't we just try it, and see what happens? Maybe we can work around it somehow."

"HA! Not likely, but we'll give it a try. Maybe because you're from different worlds it's okay? I don't know, fighting beside four other people?"

"You already fight by four other things, five just a few minutes ago when both my spirits were out. How is this different?"

"They were part of you? I don't know. Ugh, then it'll be six or seven."

"Madness!" Vargas agreed. "But maybe the kind of madness we'll need to win."

"Welcome to the group!" Terra bubbled. "Let's get the map out and see where we can stop and get you some equipment!"

"Can you wear my old armor, I don't think a weapon is going to do you any good. Lysanias here does no damage at all, you're probably similar, being from another world like he is."

"I didn't, at least not bare handed. Why do you think I was so afraid of leaving that one section of cave?"

"It's true, I just use my bending for damage, usually. You can mimic that, right?"

"Oh, mimicking is a different thing. That's kind of something I came up with myself. I don't exactly have hold of the power but I just grab enough to use something that someone else just did. It's all fairly complicated. But yes, I can use your bending as well as you can." They took the armor and started undressing so they could put it on. "I don't know, seems a bit heavy."

*And I thought I was a cheat. But then, they can only do it when I'm around so it's probably a wash.*

"Well, we can sell it when we get back and hopefully get you something decent. I guess shopping is the next then, then?"

"We can set down, put the balloon away, and I can bring us back to Thamasa. We don't need to fly back."

"Good point. Then we can make for Vector?"

"Unless something else comes up. We'll have to stay another night, we don't want to start in the middle of the afternoon."

"True. There's no rush, I just want Cid to know I'm okay. Let's do it!"

So the group found themselves in the center of Thamasa by the big tree, startling some people that were there.

"Oh, it's just you guys again," said a passerby. "Could you not do stuff like that? We're trying to keep a low profile around here, you know!"

"Sorry!" Lysanias called to them.

"Hey, that guy could use magic too, is everybody around here a magic user?" asked Gogo.

"Oh dear, come on, let's see what some of this junk we found will go for and get you outfitted, Gogo," Celes told them.

"Great. It's so nice being out of that cave. And what charming little houses you have here. Ibsa blaa mata uku ta na bleebo nasa. Snack cakes! You have to come with us, you know!"

"Huh?" Lysanias came back to the situation, as he had been wondering what to do in the meantime. *Did they just say snack cakes, or something in their language that just sounded to me like 'snack cakes' and actually was a grave insult to me and my entire family through my mother's side?* Gogo had been talking to Celes, started gibbering nonsense, done a 180 degree turn, and marched back to him.

"I'm using your ability to talk, remember? You have to stick by me! It only works within

a couple of meters.”

“Oh, right! Sorry about that. Here we go.”

“Hey, you know who would absolutely love this paintbrush?” the shop owner told them. “Little Relm! Yeah! Cutest kid, but the mouth on that girl. I bet she would get a kick out of this mustache too. Is this a Relic?”

“What?” Lysanias perked up, he hadn’t even checked if it was magical because, you know, a *fake mustache*?

“Yeah, pretty sure it is. Go see if her grandfather wants to buy the stuff for her, he’ll give you more than I will for it.”

“Where can we find her?”

“She’s usually painting. I’ll point her house out.” They stepped outside and he pointed. “Tell them I sent you, not that he’ll give you any trouble or anything. Strago’s a great guy.”

“Okay, thanks.”

They walked the short distance to his house and knocked on the door. “Come on in, it’s unlocked,” a voice from inside shouted out.

They walked in, and there was an older gentleman with a big white mustache, getting up from the table where he was reading a book. “Ah, our visitors,” he greeted them. “Come in, come in. What can I do for you? Need a monster identified?”

The house was small, and had what we would call an open floor plan. Directly across from the front door was another door, then you turned right and there was the rest of the house. Stove, phonograph player (Lysanias had no clue what this was), table and chairs, kitchen area with some cupboards.

“Ah, you must be Strago!” said Gogo, sticking out a hand. “We’ve just been hearing about you and little Relm from the shopkeeper. Seems she’s quite the painter!”

“Oh, are you interested in art? Yes, yes, my granddaughter is the most talented painter in the world, and make no mistake!”

The two men laughed. “I’m sure you’re right. I’d love to see her work sometime.”

They went on and on about it, leaving Lysanias dumbstruck. *How in the world did they just do that? They just walked over to that man and now they’re chatting away like they’ve been friends forever. I couldn’t do that if I studied a million years.*

“Anyway, reason I’m here. We found a couple of things the shopkeeper said she would like. Here we are!” Celes got them out and set them on the table.

“That’s a nice brush all right, but we’ll let the expert weigh in, shall we?” He went over to the door and looked in. “Hey Relm, want to come here for a second?”

“What is it? Oh, hey everyone. We having a party or something?” A small girl, probably around ten, walked into the room. She had on an oversized hat, a black top, and red parachute pants with stars on the bottoms. More than a little paint stained her face and hands, some of it fresh so she must have been painting recently.

“Nope. Actually they found a few things, we were wondering if you might be interested. Take a look.”

“Oh wow!” Relm grabbed the brush and looked it over. “This is a nice brush, is it magic?”

Lysanias did a quick check, feeling out sources of magic in the room, but looked at her in surprise. “It does seem magical, but if I may say so, you don’t. Have MP, that is. Do you?”

“Oh.” Her face fell. “Not yet, no. If I ever do.”

“Relm is a special case,” Strago explained. “She’s only half descended from Mage Warriors, as her father came from outside the town. So her magic isn’t in spells, like most, but bound up in her paintings. Don’t fret my dear, they more than make up for doing spells.”

“Phhh, I know that, you old fogey. I just got something in my eye, that’s all.” She grabbed the mustache and stuck it on herself. “Don’t fret my dear,” she intoned. “You’ll only be teased the rest of your life because you’re not a real magic user like everyone else in town.”

“Now just a moment!”

“Hey, that’s weird.”

“What is?”

“This thing.” She took it off and looked at it. “Oh, it’s gone again.” She put it on. “There

it is." She took it off. "And it's gone." She put it on. "There it is." She took it off. "There it goes."

"Would you stop that and tell me what's going on?" Strago insisted.

"I have the strangest feeling I can control monsters when I wear this." She put it on again. "Yup. How weird is that. Where did you find this?"

"Treasure chest in a weird cave," Celes told her.

"Ew, and I just stuck it on my face? Warn a girl about that sort of thing, would you? I don't know where it's been! Oh well. I'll give you a gold piece for it."

"It really is a Relic?" Strago asked her. "You're not just playing a game?"

"I'm not, it really is!" she insisted.

"She's telling the truth, by the way," Gogo informed them. "With that on she could control monsters. To a certain extent, of course. Astonishing. As though it was made for her in mind, but that's... impossible. Right?"

"How do *you* know what I can do with it on?" she asked.

"Oh, I know," they said mysteriously.

"And the brush is good?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, the brush." She looked it over. "It's better than my current one. What did you pay for that one? Seven thousand gold?"

"Don't remind me. Go back to your paints, I'll settle up with these people."

"You better not take advantage of my grandpa's generous nature!" she cautioned. "Or I'll paint your portraits, all of you! Thanks, grandpa!" She ran over to hug him and kiss his cheek, then went back to her room.

He sighed. "I'd really do anything for her, you know that? So, the brush and the Relic. Ten thousand gold for the pair?"

Celes looked at Lysanias, who shrugged. "That will almost buy the Luminous Robe, right? We can make up the rest pretty easily. Or maybe our discount will still apply?"

"Wait, a robe? You're trying to buy a robe?"

"We want to equip Gogo here," she explained. "They came here, uh, without any real equipment."

"I see! Tell you what, I think I have a spare one of those, I'll go look. If I do I'll give you four thousand gold so you can buy a shield or something, *and* my spare robe, if that's really what you're after. So that's like 15,000 right?"

"That would be great, thanks!"

So the trade was made, and they went back to the shop.

"How did you do?" he asked.

"He gave us the robe," Celes told him. "So maybe a helmet or shield?"

"Got a fantastic piece of headgear here, the Circlet. Steal at seven thousand gold. Raises magic +4, a +1 to speed, +3 to stamina, and a +2 to strength."

"Wait, strength?" protested Lysanias. "I thought you didn't have strength, you had something you called *vigor*. I asked about that *specifically*."

"Eh, strength, vigor, what's the difference? That's more a regional thing, really."

"What's the *difference*? Regional?" He couldn't talk anymore, his teeth were clenched to tightly and he was rage handing.\*

\*You know, where you're really angry and you half clench your fist in front of you? Like you just want to punch something, but you don't want anyone to know that you want to punch something? No, that's just me? Okay.

## Chapter 10

### A few Revelations

When: Several deep breaths later

Where: Shop in Thamasa

“So what you’re telling me,” Lysanias finally managed after a few calming breaths in and out, “is that certain pieces of equipment, such as this one, raise stats. Stats, as you call them, are how you know how strong or fast you are. They’re just a number connected to you somehow that goes up with your ‘levels.’” He held a circlet in his hand, basically just a narrow band of metal made to fit on the head.

“That’s right.”

“And these pieces of equipment aren’t Relics, so despite making a person stronger or faster can be worn in great numbers?”

“It is odd, now that you mention it. How do they work?” He stared at the hoop himself. “Never really stopped to consider it. I guess Relics give you abilities, but armor or weapons can just raise stats? Yes, clearly that’s how it works.”

*Clearly. Just like I never considered having an absolute number I could point to or change on a whim by beating something up, you never considered changing them to be anything but ordinary.* “And you have a *vigor* stat which some people call *strength* which can be raised by these certain pieces of- wait a second.” He turned to Celes. “What does that armor do for you? You grabbed it right quick when it came out of the chest.”

“Oh.” She at least had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. “A plus five to strength, a +3 to speed and magic, and a +2 to stamina.”

“I see. You don’t even attack half the time, why wear something that raises strength so much? You should be focusing on your magic, after all you’re boosting magic damage with the earrings, right? Wouldn’t your magic stat be basically multiplied out of proportion because of that?” He shook the circlet at her.

“That’s a fair point,” she conceded.

“So what do you have in stock, and what stats does it raise? I don’t care about stuff that doesn’t, just lay out what I might wear and what it does.”

“Sure thing! I tell ya, you guys are the best customers I’ve *ever had!*”

So it turned out something like this:

Item Name	Pre-discount	Raised Stats
Tiger Mask	2500	+2 speed, +1 Stamina, +3 Strength
Circlet	7000	+4 magic, +1 Speed, +3 Stamina, +2 Strength
Tiara	3000	+2 Magic
Mystery Veil	5500	+3 Magic, +1 Speed
Power Sash	5000	+1 Speed, +5 Stamina, +5 Strength
Luminous Robe	11000	+1 Magic

“The circlet is the obvious choice,” Gogo decided, looking over the notes Lysanias had made and set next to each piece as the man brought them out.

“You can read that scribble?” Celes asked.

“He can. Normally just reading stuff isn’t a power, mind you, but in his case it seems to be.”

“Right.”

“But you know what? I don’t need the Genji armor, so you can keep it. Yeah, that’s right, keep your stupid armor. I can just put the Power Sash over *my* armor and get almost the same benefit.”

“You can’t wear two pieces of armor!” Celes protested.

“Maybe you can’t, but remember, as far as this world goes it’s still only one piece of armor. You can’t tell the ‘stats’ on my armor, or my shield or my sword, now can you?”

“...No.”

“There you are. Your armor seems to be a factor in how much damage you take.

Whatever damage you would have taken is reduced by some number given to you by the armor you wear. My armor *keeps me from being hit*. It's a totally different thing. So it looks like we're wandering around getting some more money. We didn't get quite enough to buy both a sash and a circlet, did we?"

"Pretty close. But not several of them. Terra's going to want one, now that we figured out just how good it really is."

"Exactly. Do you have a couple of these?" Lysanias indicated the circlet.

"Sure, enough for your party, anyway."

"Great. Put them aside, we'll be back for them."

"You got it!"

Lysanias could see the coins in his eyes.

"So we're staying?" Vargas asked them at dinner.

"The armor here is nicer than we thought," Celes agreed. "And as much as I want to leave so I can see my grandfather again, we should be as outfitted as we can when we head into Empire territory."

"Agreed. Also the monsters lurking in that cave we found Gogo have given me pause. We all struggled a bit there, so a few more levels would ease my mind a bit."

"Also, we need to make sure I really can participate in battles," Gogo reminded them. "I would like to explore all you can do, find what the best strategy is for me in fights here."

"Can we get anywhere from here that has high gold dropping monsters?" Terra asked.

"Only the velt to the west, seems silly to go there and deprive ourselves of XP."

"Good point. Guess it's just around here then."

"After we do a day of monster slaying we'll have to compare everything carefully," Celes told them. "Maybe something with a higher defense is actually inferior to something that raises stats. I know we could probably just teleport back here, but once we infiltrate Vector things might start moving pretty fast. So pick out the stuff you think suits your style now."

The others agreed.

So the group stayed another 24 hours, making it day 17 when they set off towards the southern continent. Gogo had been able to contribute, just as Lysanias had, though Celes and Vargas kept shaking their heads like they were doubting their eyes, having six people (when the spirit was out) in a combat at once. They spent the next three days crossing the ocean to the southern continent, landing just beyond the mountains at the eastern most edge.

"We can't fly in," Celes insisted. "They see this airship and they'll just want one. Let's not give them any ideas. We'll cross overland, make a stop in Albrook, then head to Vector once we know the situation."

"How long will that take?" Vargas asked.

"A couple of days. Why, you in a hurry? I'm the one that wants to make sure Cid is all right."

"Just wondering. Let's go."

Oddly enough, some of the monsters around here used magic, which Celes said was probably due to runoff from the factories at Vector. She used an ability of hers called "Runic" to absorb any hostile spells coming from the other side, which interestingly enough also absorbed any magic the party used, instead. So it took some careful management but they got through it, Lysanias and Gogo's bending didn't count so they were able to attack normally.

Albrook didn't really have anything spectacular the group needed so they pressed on. The town was guarded, yes, but there wasn't a wall (or any artisanal steel slats) around it or anything. They slipped in, checked the stores out by Lysanias copying someone so the shopkeeper didn't get suspicious upon seeing a stranger, and sent them in. Vargas, the one who volunteered, said they didn't have anything better than the group already had. So they slipped out again. On day 23 the capital came into view, a massive, sprawling city near a forest, where the group was currently hiding.

"I can probably sneak us in," Celes told the group. "I know a lot of the back alley paths around here."

"Sneak again?" Vargas sneered. "I didn't sign up to sneak everywhere, you know."

"You do realize this is the heart of the empire, right? Anyone recognizes either Terra or myself and we'll have hundreds of soldiers after us. Can you fight a hundred guys and get away before the heavy equipment arrives? There's still magitek armor to worry about after all. And who knows what else Cid has come up with in the meantime."

He considered, looking the wall over carefully. "I guess we'll have to sneak in."

"But I'll still change how you both look," Lysanias told them.

"I did always want to be a redhead..."

The entire place had a tall, iron wall around it, and Celes took the lead walking boldly into... a gate. Magitek armor were stomping around beyond it, sweeping those weird beams all over the place. At the side of the gate was a bored looking man in a booth, and Celes went over to him.

"Papers, please," said the man, holding a hand out.

"You want what?" she asked, taken aback.

"Your identity papers, of course. You want to enter the capital, you have to show your identity papers."

"Since when?"

"Since always. What rock have you been living under all this time?"

"We're just from a neighboring town, that's all."

"You walked all the way here, battling monsters, and didn't know you needed identity papers? How did you leave your town without them, anyway?"

"Er..."

"I think you all better just wait right there while I call someone about this."

"Oh, that's not necessary, we'll just leave, you don't have to trouble yourself."

But beyond the gate the magitek armors were swinging this way, obviously alerted somehow by the man.

"Not to be rude, but I think your booth is on fire," Gogo told the man, Terra having set it ablaze with her fire magic while he had been distracted.

"What are you talking about, on fire?" The man looked over and yes, a bookshelf full of papers was cheerfully burning over in the corner of the place. "Fire!" he yelled. "Get some water in here! Hey out there!" He threw the back door open. "My bookshelf is on fire, get some water. You wait right there! Come back here!" he yelled to the group, who was currently high tailing it out of there. "Get that gate open, catch those people!"

The group streamed out of the gate area, followed close behind by imperial machines of destruction and death. These were fairly fast, and quickly outpaced the group. Lysanias of course could have shot ahead, but wouldn't leave his party like that, and so kept his speed down.

"We'll have to fight," Celes told them.

"Now we're talking!" Vargas exclaimed, looking eager.

"Do we have to kill them?" Terra asked.

"Wait, that's a good question," Lysanias replied. "Is this really a magitek armor?" He looked it over, as it was standing there motionless like a good little random encounter would.

"Yeah, that's it. What did you think it was?" Celes told him. "What should we do? Use magic? We don't look like ourselves..."

"Wait though, the people are just sitting there." He pointed. The two looked down at him in confusion. This wasn't the way things were supposed to be going, and he could see them counting like they couldn't believe they were facing so many at one time. "It's not even enclosed."

"I see what you're saying, just attack the people and not the armor," Vargas figured.

"Yeah, exactly. It's the worst design ever, no offense to Cid or anything." *The ones back in Korra's world weren't magical, but at least they were actually somewhat better designed. Why leave the squishy person driving so vulnerable?*

"If you can get up there," Terra complained. "Look how high they are."

*That's a good point. Almost wish I had those dragon boots now. Huh. How about that?*

"Are you going to attack or what?" the one on the right called down to them.

"We're talking it over!" she shouted back up to him. "Just give us a second, okay? Can you give us *a second*? Are you running low on fuel? Is your telephone ringing back home? Got a cake in the oven? Is guard duty so exciting you want to get back to guarding a stupid gate right away??"

"Not exactly? It's fine, take your time I guess?"

"Thank you. Honestly, the manners of some people."

"That's telling them, sister," Gogo told her. "This reality, I tell you! When people go into combat the entire world forces the combatants to wait around and take turns. It seems like a crass move, but by goodness make them wait. All day if you have to. Show the reality who the boss around here is."

"But more could be arriving any minute," Celes told them. "We really should work out a plan."

"I have a plan," Lysanias told them. "Let me know when it's my turn."

"What should we do in the meantime?" Vargas asked.

"Stall them. Defend or something."

"Defend he says. How is this restoring my honor?" But he took a defensive stance until it was time for Lysanias to act, and he shot the cables out of his armor to reach up to the soldiers and wrap around them. With a yank he snagged them out of the seat, after all seat belts hadn't been invented yet, and he slammed them down into the ground. They were yelling and screaming and carrying on in exactly the way you would expect, having been torn out of their vehicles in a way they hadn't thought was possible.

"Now can we beat them up?" Vargas asked.

"See if they have these 'identity papers' first," Gogo cautioned, "we'll need to know what they look like, right? I mean if we're going to forge some."

"Actually," Lysanias told them, looking the helpless men over. "I have a better idea. This combat space we're in, no one can see in here, right?"

"That's right."

*So weird. It took me quite a while to notice the landscape was subtly changing but again, that's normal for combats around here. But I think in this case we can use it to our advantage.*

"And until this battle is over that's the case, right?"

"Yes. But the others are aware that we're in combat, and could be massing nearby if we beat these."

"Let them, I'm actually hoping for it. Here's what we're going to. These guys are wearing face masks, obviously a moron designed these uniforms, but we can make it work for us. We'll just take their clothes, two of us can pilot the machines, and the rest of us can be taken 'captive.' We'll march into the place and not even need these 'identity papers.' After all, two magitek armors went out, two are coming back. Who would suspect?"

"That's rather clever," Vargas told him, impressed. "It's true, anyone around here would have attacked the machines and men as a unit. They would have lost HP and that was that. You actually separated them, so now we can take the machines over. I never would have even considered such a thing. You just came up with that right now?"

"Yeah, you think it'll work?"

"Let's try it. Hold them with those cables and I'll get their clothes off them."

"I'll pilot one," Celes told them, putting her armor back into inventory.

"I'll pilot the other," Terra announced, following suit. "I think I remember how. I spent enough time in them, doing Kefka's bidding."

"Great, that works out well on this end, too."

"What are you doing?" asked the soldier on the left. "This isn't how it's supposed to go at all."

"Oh, I know," Lysanias told them. "You thought we would smash your machines to pieces and get away, didn't you?"

"No, we thought we would stomp all over you," said the one to the right.

"And what level are you gentleman, hm? We've been doing nothing but roaming the countryside the last two weeks raising levels. Even in armor do you think you would stand a chance? Now be quiet, I have to concentrate." Lysanias touched the one, then the other,

turning them into fairly good likenesses of Terra and Celes. "Now, you," he pointed to the Terra one. "Tell this guy what you see."

"You're the traitor general!" the one gasped. "Why didn't you tell me!? If you could have used magic to get us out of this..."

"Of course I'm not! I can't use magic!"

"You are!"

"Are not!"

"Just look down!"

"Down? Oh my!"

"That's right, you're a woman now. And what do you see?"

"I don't know, some green haired chick."

"Wait, me as well?" She looked down at herself. "Oh, those are very- how did you do that?"

"Never you mind. You have now been given the forms of the two most wanted people in the empire. General Celes and Kefka's personal plaything-"

"I heard that!"

"Terra."

"You mean the witch?" Fake-Terra asked. "Kefka knifed twenty people personally when he heard she got away somehow!"

*And he's kept around... why? Oh right, because he's probably the shadow avatar.*

"That's right. Now we are going to march through those gates, you are going to stay quiet, and if you're very, very good I'll turn you back into yourselves once we're through." *Of course it'll wear off but they don't need to know that.*

"We'll be good!" they said at once.

"Then we understand each other. How you two doing up there?" he called.

Two thumbs up showed over the side.

"Great. Anything else? Everyone ready to look defeated and surly? Game faces on? Okay, how do we get out of this combat space?"

"Everybody just decides the combat is over," Vargas told him.

"Well, I'm thinking the combat is over," he told the two. "If you want your HP dropped a few points to make it more realistic, I'm fine with it."

"It's over!" they both shouted, and suddenly they were standing next to several more magitek armors, and nervously looked around.

"So you captured them?" one of the people in a nearby armor said.

"That's right," Celes answered, trying to pitch her voice down. With the mask it sounded even more fake, and Lysanias rolled his eyes. *This will never work, I should have turned them into men before they went up there.*

"Lucky dogs. Probably get a promotion just because you were nearer the gate than we were."

"Maybe!"

"Let's march them back. Hey, isn't that the ex-general?"

"Is it?"

"That or that Maria chick from the opera posters. But what would *she* be doing here? Come on you... six? March."

*Wait, it actually worked? That fake voice, and they bought it? I guess they just saw what they wanted to see, no illusion magic needed. Wild.*

So the group was marched into the city and the two real, actual, honest to goodness, no trickery here sir no sir, guards marched them off deeper into the city to put them in a cell and tell the emperor the good news. However, once out of sight the lumbering machines squeezed into an alley and the real Celes and Terra jumped out.

"But we better do something about these things," Celes told them. "Someone comes down here and finds two abandoned armors just lying around-"

While she had been talking Lysanias got out two contain wards and sucked the machines in.

"-Never mind. Come on, factory is this way."

"What about us?" asked Fake-Terra.

"I've got an idea," Celes told them. "Imp!" Magic swirled, and suddenly two imps were standing there. They looked at each other and started freaking out again. "Gentleman, gentleman, please, this too is only temporary." Celes put her arms around the shoulders of the two, drawing them closer. "I know, you look hideous, but that's a small price to pay. Terra, two green cherries, please."

Terra handed the small fruits over.

"Now, I happen to know these fruits will return you to normal," she teased, dangling one of them from each hand.

*Wait, normal/normal or normal back to being girls and then that will wear off? Eh, I guess it doesn't matter.*

"Would you like them?"

"Yes!" They tried to grab them but their stumpy arms were too short.

"Good, that's good, yeah that's real good, man. I'll give them to you. But there's a problem. See, you have to eat them by the light of the moon. The cherry is poison otherwise. Do you understand?"

Terra tried to stifle a giggle as the two nodded their heads.

"Then here you are." She handed them over. "Ah ah ah, do you want to die from putting something in your mouth?" The two lowered their hands, obviously they were just going to eat the thing. "That's better. So for now you hide someplace, lay low, and tonight you can eat these and turn back. Got that?"

They nodded again.

"Good. We're leaving, don't follow us." The two backed away and the group, having made sure the coast was clear, started off towards the factory.

After a few steps Terra couldn't hold it back anymore and started laughing. "That was mean!" she chided Celes. "Why would you do that?"

"Do what? I gave them the cure. That's 300 gold worth of stuff right there. They should be grateful."

"But turning them into imps. I mean turning them into us was bad enough."

"You did ask what the point of that spell was. Well, I just found one."

"I guess. Can we change back, this mask is all hot and I'm getting sweaty."

"Once we're in the factory. Come on, it's just ahead."

"By the way, why didn't you know about the ID check?" Vargas asked. "I thought you lived here most of the time."

"I did. But I was always traveling as part of the army. I never walked in through the front gate. I was a general. I traveled with my troops, and they knew where I was at all times. I didn't need anything like that, and if I did, my magic was my identification."

"I see."

"By the way," Gogo noted, "I see those two were right about one thing."

"What's that?" she asked.

"You look really flex as an opera singer." They pointed and sure enough there was a poster plastered to the wall showing Celes, or what looked like Celes, in a fancy dress as two men pointed swords at each other in the lower corner.

"Oh, that dress is so beautiful," cooed Terra. "I want to wear something all frilly and nice for once."

"That... that... that..." Celes sputtered. "Wait, did you say 'flex?'"

"Yeah, flex. What, don't you have that saying?"

"No. Flex?"

"Must be lost in the translation, I can't really explain it."

"Uh huh..."

"Opera huh?" Vargas asked. "Not a fan myself, but to see Celes in something like that? I might take a chance on it."

"That's not me!" she finally managed to get out.

"No? Looks an awful lot like you," Terra told her.

"Are you *sure* you're an ex-general?" Vargas asked.

“You’ve seen me do magic! And use my runic blade abilities. Would an opera singer be able to do that? I was just piloting a magitek armor. What more proof do you need?”

“Why couldn’t you do all those things and still be a great singer?” he asked. “We wouldn’t think any less of you. Everyone needs a hobby. Mine is flower arrangement.”

*Wait what? Is is joking?*

“Yeah, let us hear you sing some time, Celes!” Lysanias prodded.

“Never. Come on, we’re close.”

The two were stopped but given Celes did actually know how to speak “military” and knew the policies for “volunteers” going into the labs the guards let her pass and move inside. She shook out her hair after taking the helmet off.

“Finally. Cid should be in the back, tinkering with something. Let’s go.”

## Chapter 11

### Transformation

When: Moments later

Where: Moving deep into the Magitek factory

“Cid!” Celes called to the older man tinkering with a magitek armor frame. She frantically waved and he got up, looking the group over as they got near.

“Can I help you, soldier?” he asked.

“What are you talking about, Cid? It’s me, your granddaughter!”

“Is this some sort of joke? I know what my granddaughter looks like, thank you very much.”

“Huh? Oh, shoot, I’m still a redhead, aren’t I?”

“You never asked me to change you back,” Lysanias told her.

“I’m asking now. Do I have to tell you to do everything?”

“Though you do sound an awful lot like her...”

“Just a second, Cid.”

Lysanias touched her face and undid his changes to her, putting her back to normal.

“What in the world? What kind of magic was that?” Cid asked, staring at the now revealed Celes.

“We can talk about that later, granddad. Are you okay?”

“Forget about me, what about you? I’ve been hearing the most awful rumors about you turning traitor, being killed, vanishing into thin air, running away with General Leo as your lover-”

“I supposedly did what?”

“I didn’t put any stock in that last one, but he does disappear an awful lot. And then you did... What was I supposed to think?”

“Anything but that. I mean he’s nice enough I suppose.”

“You should find a nice man to settle down with, I’ve often said that.”

“Not the time, granddad. Look, can we go someplace else? Looking like this, well, if anyone saw me...”

“You did turn traitor! That’s why the regular soldier’s uniform! You snuck in here, didn’t you?”

“I had to. I had to know you were all right. And we have to convince you to stop making these,” she pointed to the armor, “for the empire.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “That’s going to take some doing. Who are all these people, anyway?”

“My friends. Please, at least listen to what we have to say.”

“For you, of course. Come on, my office may be small but it’s private.”

Celes fit the helmet back on and Cid walked them to his office, where she and Terra both took off their headgear.

“Better change me back too,” she said. “He’s going to want to know the whole story.”

“That’s fine,” Lysanias told her, making the change to her as well.

“I know you,” Cid gasped. “You’re the magical girl! Rumor was you disappeared as... oh.”

“Yes, that’s part of this too, grandpa. Do you know what Kefka was doing to her?”

He looked down, away from her. “In a way. Ever since she was a baby he would bring her to me for examination, blood tests and the like, to see why she had magic. It’s how I was able to get a rudimentary understanding of how magic works and successfully implant some in him and you.”

“You *examined* me?” Terra shrieked. “Even as a *baby*? What- what does that even mean?”

“I’m not sure you would want to know, my dear. You were always sort of out of it, and I didn’t question why. Not healthy for me to ask too many questions when so many high ranking officers were around. Later I worked out the existence of the crown, of course-”

“I don’t believe this!” She looked furious and was obviously trying to hold back tears.

“You did tests on a baby?”

"My dear, it was for *science*. I don't expect you to understand-

"Oh, for science, that makes it all better. You violated me in the worst possible way, for years and years, and I didn't even remember it?" She jammed the helmet back on. "I can't even look at you right now. I'll go stand watch in the hallway." She stormed out, but turned back before slamming the door. "If you weren't the grandfather of a *very good friend of mine* I would kill you where you stand. Needing your help or not, I will *never* forgive you for what you did to me."

She slammed the door.

"I concur," Vargas agreed. "You are a man of little honor. Did we not need you so badly, I would hold you down while she carved every HP out of you."

"Don't kid yourself," Gogo told him. "All the real advancement comes at a very high cost. Even where I come from, understanding how our abilities worked? You have no idea how many were *taken apart* trying to figure it out. We were feared and hated for our ability to steal powers, and that made us a perfect target."

"We're getting a bit off track here," Cid told them. "Though this notion of stealing powers interests me-" He sensed this was not exactly the time, as they started glaring at him. "Ahem. Yes, well, you're here Celes, and at great personal risk. What do you need from me?"

"We need you to stop working for the empire, destroy all your notes, and whatever the source of magic is for making the armors we need to steal it. This will cripple the empire and make them easier to take out."

*Eventually. But I suppose it's a start. I can't fight a whole army any more than Vargas can, and this will certainly get Kefka's attention. He'll have to respond, and we'll be there to welcome him.*

"Oh, and we'll be taking any armors that have yet to leave the factory floor. Lysanias can handle that. The less they have the field the better."

"I can't do that!" he insisted. "Even doing one of those things would mean my death."

"And you would work for an organization that threatened your life?" Lysanias softly asked. "Perhaps we should just let Terra have you."

He paled. "You don't understand. None of you understand. Everything I've done, every moral I've ignored, has been for the betterment of the world. Imagine every person being able to use magic again! Imagine magical machines that never break down or allow us to do things we just couldn't with pure science. Don't you see, only the empire has the resources to allow me to do the science I *need* to do. They would be within their rights to kill me, if I turned traitor. They wouldn't want me to start working for rival nations, that would lead to war! Yes, it's unfortunate about Terra, but it had to be done, to get this all started. The empire is doing good in the world. They have begun a new age, giving people everywhere a chance at a new life. You must see that!"

"Good?" snorted Vargas. "Overrunning towns, destroying anyone in the way with the armors you make? Making everyone live in fear? Old man, we're already at war with them, and have been for some time. What do you think the Returners are all about? Wake up."

"What? My armors aren't used for that! The emperor himself assured me that..." He trailed off as Celes was nodding.

"Yes they are, grandfather. Are you really so deep into your work you don't even realize what's going on the world?"

He heavily sat down at his desk, shocked. "From anyone else I wouldn't have believed it. But you, Celes, you wouldn't lie to me, would you?"

"Of course not!"

"And are they doing such terrible things?"

"Yes. It took me a long time to see it too, grandfather, but I did. And you must as well. This empire may have started out well-intentioned but now it is anything but."

"It's true," he admitted softly. "I haven't really left this facility in years. There's so much to learn, to study, to build, I just haven't poked my head out to see the state of the world. Perhaps that was a mistake. If they're perverting my science for their own ends, then I agree they will have to be stopped."

*Oh, so no remorse about what you've done, but someone uses 'your' science in a way you didn't expect and suddenly you're on our side?*

"So you'll help us?"

"Will you get me out of here? I wasn't kidding, I would be executed for treason if it was found out I helped you destroy this factory."

"You'll be committed to our cause," Vargas told him. "Just as with Celes and Terra, there would be nowhere on this world you could hide. The empire will track you down for this. Your only hope will be to help us take it down, permanently."

"Yes, I see that, I'm not an idiot. I know what leaving here means."

"I just don't want you whining about it afterwards."

"HA! That assumes we survive until tomorrow. You do realize where you are, right? How exactly are we going to do all this?"

"Perhaps a tour is in order?" Gogo suggested. "We don't know the layout here, number of guards, guard rotations, or what will be involved in every step of Celes' plan. With you to escort us, will we be challenged? Or can we just pretend to be high ranking empire officials on a tour?"

"No such tour is scheduled though."

"But a surprise inspection wouldn't be," Celes guessed. "If you look annoyed with us, and tell anyone that asks these 'stupid inspectors' sprang this on you, I bet that would keep anyone from getting too curious about us. Wouldn't want to be put on report because their uniform isn't buttoned the right way or whatever. They'll just disappear when they see us coming."

"Indeed," Gogo agreed. "You happily showing us around means a very different thing than us looking stern and writing notes on clipboards about the deplorable conditions here. You have clipboards, right?"

"Of course we do. What rock have you been living under?"

"The stomach of an inter-dimensional worm beast, actually," they told him. "At least that's the best description we came up with once we escaped from there."

"A what?"

"I'll tell you later."

So Cid got clipboards for everyone and they stepped out of the room. Celes had her helmet back on, and pulled Terra aside.

"We're 'escorting' everyone through the base, take a look at what sort of things we're dealing with here. Are you going to be okay?"

"Celes, I'm not mad at you. I'm glad you got to use magic, maybe we never would have met if you hadn't. And we need your grandfather, despite not hearing any apology for what he did to me as a *baby*. I'll work with him, but I will never trust him. That's going to have to be good enough for you."

"I realize you're angry but this isn't the time, okay? Let's just get through this, and tonight we can drink a toast to crippling the empire."

"HA! You're buying."

"You got it."

"Let's get this over with."

So the group, led by a grumbling Cid, toured the factory. They looked at the assembly line for the magitek armors, and there were probably twenty of them in various states of construction. Several more were there for repairs or upgrades, and technicians of all levels were busy tending to them.

"Of course, we don't run twenty four hours here," he explained. "There's a time at night when the factory closes down for a few hours. Of course we post a strong guard, not that anyone would get past the gates, then past the guards at the entrance to the factory itself."

"I suppose there's redundant power systems in case an enemy took one out, to cut the lights in here," Gogo asked. They pointed to the overhead lights, not LED by any stretch of the imagination but better than the oil lamps most places used.

"Oh, actually no, that's a good idea. Why didn't I think of that? I'll design something like that right away!"

"So, no redundant systems. I see, I see." He scowled and scribbled some notes.

"I'm sure I can have something in place by next week."

"Ha!"

"Anyway, if you'll step this way." They next went to the lab, where new and surprising metal monstrosities were made. "Here's the vault that houses our research," he told them, stepping up to a safe. "Naturally it's all locked up at night when my fellow scientists go home."

"I suppose it has a mechanism so it can only be opened at certain times? So someone couldn't, I don't know, hit you with a wrench a couple of times and get you to cough up the combination?" Gogo asked, because it seemed they knew what the heck they were talking about. Lysanias had no clue, he was just making notes about what he was seeing. The lab people all looked up from their work, probably surprised at the idea, Cid looked rather surprised himself.

"Oh no, it could be opened by anyone at any time with the... right... Humm... how would I even... Oh, perhaps a large clock built into the other side..." He trailed off, mumbling about gearing mechanisms.

"So, can be opened at any time. Probably vulnerable to being opened from below... unless the entire vault is very thick metal? Or is this just a closet with a metal door on the front of it?"

"Er, yes, it's, uh, just the door."

"Just the- Oh dear, oh dear." They scribbled some more and the lab people bent furiously to their tasks.

Lysanias stifled a laugh. *It's a good thing we're taking this place out, Gogo might have actually given them a bunch of ideas to make their security better. Wait, what side are they on?*

But he wasn't laughing as their tour concluded with the very high security magic extraction chamber. This was basically a vault door by itself, and the guards, according to Cid, didn't even know what was inside. One great thing about a military like this, people stood outside a door that was inside a secure facility that was inside a fenced in area that was inside a city with a huge wall around it that was patrolled by death machines didn't ask questions when the head scientist around there said "move." Cid being one of the only ones with clearance to get inside, if he was taking them the others must too. Right?

They went inside and the door closed.

"This is where the 'magic' happens, if you'll forgive the pun," Cid told them. "Come along, come along, I consider this to be my greatest achievement, actually. Building the containment system for them." The group looked confused as they walked into a large chamber outfitted with enormous glass tubes, perhaps a dozen. Inside each of these tubes was a creature, in most cases a shriveled, sad, lonely creature. Cid actually seemed upbeat, like he was giving a tour now, showing off for his granddaughter.

"Espers!" Terra cried, pulling her helmet off.

"The source of magic for the empire," Cid told them all, sounding proud. "From here we extract their magic, sending it through these conduits to be infused into the Magitek system. Of course, some of that 'essence' if you will went into you, my dear. Kefka too, but I hear he's going a bit crazy of late."

"You... you madman!" Terra went on, breathing heavily.

"I agree, this is a bit much," Vargas told him. "Are these creatures still alive?"

"How long have they been in here?" Gogo asked. "Not even we were treated like this."

"You put something from these creatures inside me?" Celes asked, looking about to throw up.

"Creatures?" Terra spat. "Is that what you see here? Creatures? These are *people!* Living. Breathing. People. With lives, and loves, and..."

"Er, Terra?" Lysanias asked, putting a hand up. "Perhaps you should calm down a little? I'm feeling a lot of magic-"

"The espers, what are they doing?" Vargas asked, looking around nervously.

"Doing? They're heavily sedated, they can't be doing- oh dear." He finally looked up at them, after all the scientist doesn't really see the test subject, do they? The Espers were awake, glowing, and Lysanias could see that if they had the strength they would be ripping

their way out of those tubes to... what?

"Monster! Inhuman! Science! You!" Lysanias snapped back to Terra, who was now glowing with power and seeming to be losing her mind. She was tearing at her face, her clothes, and worst of all seemed to be *changing* somehow.

"Help her!" Celes called to him.

"How?"

She writhed and crackled with energy, then gave an inhuman screech as her clothes tore off her. In her place was a radiant being, aglow with energy and floating off the floor without support. She looked like an esper herself, taller than before and far more bestial. Mostly human in form but with thick flowing hair, it floated in a cloud around her head. Her skin was a pale pink, seemingly lit from within, and at her knees and elbows were tufts of what looked like fur. Her face was contorted in rage, and there was no compassion in her eyes anymore.

"**KILL YOU!**" she screamed, and leaving a trail of energy in her wake lunged for Cid. Her arms were pulled back, it seemed she now had claws of a sort, and had, in her rage, forgotten she could attack with magic. This was fortunate, because Esper Terra boosted with Relic earrings (you didn't think those came off, did you? They were magic too) could probably kill him in one shot.

Lysanias spirit stepped in front of Cid, her attack being knocked off his upraised shield. (Of course he walks around with it out all the time now. He's in a world where random encounters are a thing, and he doesn't get an inventory) Boosted with the sash and circlet he didn't go flying, simply trying to bash her off to the side. "Terra, don't forget yourself!" he called. "He'll pay for what he's done but this isn't the time!"

"Kill!" she repeated. She slashed again, and again he shielded Cid from her claws.

"What's happened to her?" Vargas cried. "Do we attack her?"

"Just hold her off while I get the cover off my shield! Can't do that while defending him."

"Imp!" cast Celes, which of course bounced off her. "It was worth a try."

Gogo put his hand out and she started contorting and screaming, being pulled back.

Lysanias recognized it.

"No! We don't use blood bending like that!"

"What would you suggest?" they shot back.

"I'll hold her!" Vargas bragged, coming around behind her. He got her in hold and she started thrashing around. "She's very strong."

"I'll take care of it!" Lysanias promised, now able to unhook his shield.

"Fire!" Terra cast, as she didn't need to move for that. Her eyes, looking straight at him, glowed.

"No, wait, my-" Lysanias cried, as the energy swirled around him. He held up the hand that had *the wall ring on it*. The energy bounced off the energy barrier around him and slammed into her, scattering both her and Vargas. She was up again in an instant, once again streaking towards Cid but with the cover off the shield all it took was Terra touching that blackness and there was silence in the lab.

"Sir, is everything all right?" There was a pounding on the door and the soldiers outside were yelling.

"Yes, everything's fine," Cid yelled back. "Just running a drill. Nothing to worry about."

"Open this door!"

"Is she gone?" he shakily asked.

"Is she dead?" Celes asked.

"She's fine, just in my personal dimension. I've told you about this shield. Haven't I?"

"Open up!" The pounding continued.

"Just a second while I take care of this," Cid told them, staggering off towards the door.

"So what just happened?" Vargas asked, getting up and looking at the Espers. They were returning to normal now that Terra was gone.

"I honestly don't know," Lysanias admitted. *Have we lost Terra to her rage? And what did she just become? Did her magic do that? Espers... what are you, Terra?*

## Chapter 12

### Heist

When: A shocked moment later

Where: Esper holding area, Magitek factory

“All right, I’ve convinced them everything is fine,” Cid reported when he came back. He looked pale and shaky, it wasn’t every day a sweet girl transformed into a monster and tried to kill you. Unless you were in the Sailor Moon universe, which he wasn’t. “That’s bought us some time, anyway.”

“What was that, grandfather? What happened to her?”

“I really can’t say. I always thought her ability to use magic was simply either random chance or a natural resurgence of magic that just started with her. But seeing that transformation I have to wonder. How did the emperor know, when she was brought to me as a baby, that she could use magic? A baby couldn’t have used magic, there was no way he observed it. But yet he was so certain. This just raises more questions.”

“Do I have a twin sister?”

Cid froze and stare at her. “Where, uh, did you hear that?”

“I didn’t hear it, I saw it. A poster of a woman that looked like me, but who sings opera.”

“So, you saw Maria. Yes, a faint resemblance perhaps.”

Celes stalked over to him and grabbed his shirt. “Don’t lie to me grandfather. Wait *are* you even my grandfather?”

“Not really the time for this,” he insisted. “We have to get you back to my office without arousing suspicion. We’re a person down now, those guards are going to expect the same number of people out of this room that came in.”

“He’s right. We should not linger here, in case those two have not been fully convinced,” Vargas agreed. “Lysanias, do you have a plan?”

“Can you go in and calm her down?” Celes asked. “Turn her back into herself? Oh, but she’ll be naked. That might be remarked upon.”

“It would take me ten minutes at least to get the door open,” he reminded her, putting the cover back on his shield. “We don’t have that kind of time. Get the cloth fragments and I’ll start putting them back together.”

“But who will wear it?” Gogo asked.

“Leave that to me.”

So the group gathered up the tattered remains of the soldier’s uniform so Gogo and Lysanias could put it back together. Once that was done he called out his mountain spirit, who they helped into it, making any adjustments as they went. It didn’t really have a head, just a pointy bit like a mountain, but the hood was all concealing so if one didn’t look too closely it would be fine.

*And a good thing totally covering it lets people that normally wouldn’t see it. I wasn’t sure that would work, but now they’re seeing the clothes, and have no idea what is inside. So they can perceive that much, instead of just ignoring it like always. If some part was visible I don’t think it would have worked.*

“Just who are you?” Cid demanded. “How can you do all of these things? Are you an Esper? What is that creature, and where did it come from?”

“You don’t get told anything,” Celes crossly told him. “Not until I get some answers of my own.”

“Very well. I think you deserve the truth anyway,” he assured her.

Lysanias took one last look around, noting several of the tubes were broken, so he would be able to recall this place later. *After all, I’m going to be the one teleporting in here to rescue these poor souls. What happened to those tubes though?*

That done the group tried to confidently walk past the guards, who were suspicious but didn’t stop them. They hardly breathed until they were safely back in Cid’s office, where he collapsed into a chair behind his desk.

“I’m getting too old for this.”

“I’ll go after Terra,” Lysanias told them. “I’m the one she first saw when she woke up here. So I’ve known her the longest. Hopefully I can talk her down. Gogo, you’ll still know

what I can do if I'm not around, right?"

"Yes. Your powers are only available to me when you're nearby, but I don't forget what you can do."

"Great. While I'm gone you all come up with a plan. We have to steal those magitek armors, destroy the research, and free those Espers. All in a night, all without getting caught." He took the cover off his shield and handed it to Gogo. "Hold this for me, would you? Good luck." He let the spirit go, the clothes falling in a heap. *Thanks, mountain spirit. I know it's not your usual task, but you did great.*

"You too," they said, and Lysanias vanished through the portal.

*Never been this way before, not since it was set up so I knew it worked. I usually go through the "front" door. Wait, what's that?*

Lysanias created a flame above his hand, lighting the place up. As he did he realized something important. *I have spirit energy again. I can feel it sustaining this flame. Of course, this is my pocket dimension, so naturally the physical law is mine. But does that mean...* He looked around and there was Terra, naked, huddled into a ball and sobbing in the dark. *Oh no, Terra.*

"Terra?" he whispered softly.

She jerked up, eyes wild. "Fire!" she cast, and he winced, calling himself all six different kinds of fool for not taking the wall ring off before coming in here. *I could probably take it, or fire bend it away or... wait what?*

"Fire!" she repeated, trying to cast again. "Fire! What's happening to me?"

"Oh, Terra," he lamented, realizing that if he took what he had, she probably lost what she had. "You don't have MP anymore, not here. So you can't do your magic. Come here, come on." He held out his arms, the flame floating away to be somewhat above them.

"Lysanias?" He nodded. "I was so scared!" She rushed into his arms, and he held her awhile as she calmed down. He stroked her hair and waited, wishing he could do more. But finally she stepped away.

"Are you okay?"

"I guess. Why am I naked? And where are we?"

"You don't remember?"

"I remember being really, really angry at something, and we were taking a tour, and then there were... Tubes? And then suddenly I was here in the dark. I thought I was dead, I seriously did."

"You didn't see the light?"

"Light?"

He pointed, and there was the exit to the outside, a straight walk to the cave entrance leading into this place. It was fairly far away but still visible as a point of light one would naturally be drawn to in the darkness of the cave. "This is my holding area, where the shield leads to. It was made for keeping some people who had been turned into undead creatures captive. Not that you care at this point, I guess."

"I must have been too out of it. I didn't notice that."

"Well, that's okay, it made you easier to find, anyway."

"I guess."

"You want to get out of this cave?"

"Oh, you so can see more of me? I see your plan now."

"What?" He colored. "I just thought you might not want to stand here in the dark. We remade the soldier's uniform so once we get out of here you can get dressed again."

"Didn't think to bring it in here? That's typical."

"I... You're right, I should have. I don't know what I was thinking. Maybe about finding you as quickly as possible?"

"I was here for hours!"

"It was a couple of minutes at most."

"Well it felt like hours, you jerk. Come on, let's go see this place of yours. I saw a little of it when you got the balloon out, but now maybe I can see the rest. At least it's fairly warm here."

"It should be, the sun never sets here. Not that it's a real sun, it just looks like a sun."

"Stop stalling, what happened to me?" She started down the path and Lysanias fell in step beside her.

"You changed. We went into the holding tank room for lack of a better term. Apparently that's where all the empire's magic has come from, captive Espers. You freaked out, changed into some sort of Esper yourself, and went crazy. Tried to kill Cid, you really don't remember this?"

She shook her head. "Not a thing. Captive Espers... So the one in the ice wasn't the only one around. And I went crazy and actually *transformed* when I saw them?"

"It happened. You were... beautiful. You didn't even touch the ground anymore, and there was an aura of power around you. Vargas tried to hold you back, said you were really strong too."

"I see. So you got me inside the shield where I didn't have MP. For one reason or another I couldn't sustain the transformation and changed back. But I didn't remember anything that happened once the change started."

"Apparently. I figured you would still be transformed, I didn't realize you would lose your MP. But I got my energy back so it figures the physical law here is mine, not yours. It stands to reason your transformation is tied to your MP. Or something else entirely that doesn't exist here."

"You're asking the wrong lady. Oh!" The pair had come to the entrance and looked out across the plain. The cave was a little high up, just to have an elevated view which showed the surrounding lands below. Very far in the distance you could see the rainbow falls that flowed water into the whole place, and across the entire place the waterfall where it fell off the world. "You can see everything so clearly. How big is this place?"

"Pretty big. But it's made of magic, so it's no surprise everything looks really clear."

"So now what?"

"I can open the door from here. We'll be taken back to the Esper holding area, and then I'll teleport us back to Cid's office. Hopefully not inside someone... Hummmm. Maybe I'll just put some *ignore me* wards on us and we'll just walk back."

"Do you think it'll set me off again?"

"I think it was a combination of things. Cid being there, your rage at him. I don't know. If we move fast hopefully not."

"So you got a good look at me?"

"Well, I mean, I wasn't exactly staring at you..." He glanced at her and looked away again.

"Oh, honestly. It's fine, I don't mind. I have no idea how girls are supposed to act in this sort of situation anyway, remember? I was a slave to the empire growing up, I didn't get to meet a lot of other people my own age. So I've sort of just making it up as I go along. Hiding myself or acting embarrassed doesn't seem right, I mean this is who I am. And I guess you wouldn't want to look if you didn't think I was attractive."

"I do think you are," he told her honestly.

"Thanks, so it's sort of a complement, isn't it? I asked because I want you to change me into what I turned into. There must be a mirror someplace down there, right?"

"Sure, I can find one. Are you sure?"

"Maybe it'll offer me some clues as to why it happened. I don't know. But I want to see what I became. Wouldn't you?"

"I suppose so. Grab on." He offered a hand and she took it, so he *shifted* and they found themselves near the castle he had envisioned when making this place. "Come along." He tried to take his hand back but she squeezed it and held on, so they walked hand in through the place. When they found a mirror Lysanias tried to bring to mind the thing he saw swiping at him with claws, and sent his power into Terra.

"Oh," she said simply, looking at herself.

"Humm, I didn't get the skin exactly right," he mused. "It was a pale pink, but seemed almost lit from within. I can't make that happen. And of course I can't duplicate the aura you had. The hair might have been a little fluffier, it was all standing on end so—"

"It's fine," she told him. "This is good enough. This is what I turned into, huh?" She looked herself over, turning this way and that. "I've got pointed ears! Did I have a tail?" She

turned her back to the mirror.

"Didn't see behind you. I was trying to block your attacks at the time."

"I see." She looked her claws over, but then her eyes flicked over to him. "You're looking at my behind now."

"I thought you didn't mind."

"That's right, I don't." She turned to face him. "You really think I'm beautiful? Even like this?"

"Yes!"

She looked into his eyes a moment then turned back to the mirror. "Because I look like a monster."

"No, you don't. I've not done you justice, believe me. You were shining, Terra. Even in your rage, you were shining. Besides, you don't think you're beautiful because you're just not your type. Let others decide for themselves if they think you're a monster or not, don't do it for them."

"I'll take your word for it. Lysanias? Thanks." She turned again, smiling at him. "All right, let's get back before they get worried."

He changed her back and they walked back outside. "Wait a second. I went through the shield in the office, you went through in the Esper chamber. But I'm opening the door, and you're just walking out. So we'll be in the office. You want me to whip you up some clothes?"

She shook her head. "It's fine, I'll just change again in a minute. It's really no big deal."

"So if I wanted some pictures right now..."

"What's a picture?"

He sighed. "Never mind. This will take a bit, hang on." *Don't have anything to take pictures with anyway.* He started the spell to open the door, throwing energy in and spending a bit of extra time so he didn't botch it. The pair walked out into Cid's office, the group squished against the other wall to give them room. Celes hugged her, exclaiming about how glad she was Terra was okay, and the others agreed. Cid of course hung back, not sure what to expect. She pulled the uniform on and glared over at him.

"I remember being angry with you."

"Yes, well, uh..."

"So, we came up with a few plans!" Gogo told them, trying to break the tension. "Cid here was just telling us about how difficult getting those Espers out was going to be."

"Right. After the breakout we had a few days ago we put some new alarms in place. Any of the tubes break, any of the nutrient liquid is lost, an alarm will sound."

"Nutrient liquid?" Lysanias asked.

"Yes. The liquid in the tubes serves to drain the magic and keep the creatures, uh, the Espers, alive. But it has to be changed nightly. It flows in from the top and is sucked out the bottom to be processed. That aperture is the only way in or out of the tubes. Of course when one dies, we'll have to, uh..." He sensed this wasn't the best topic with Terra staring daggers at him.

"Aperture?" Vargas asked.

"Oh, are you interested in aperture science? It's really a triumph, what we managed to do, it's a huge success."

"He means an opening," Celes clarified.

"Ah. Well right now we only want them gone."

"So you see it's quite impossible to get them out without raising some sort of alarm."

"The alarm must be turned off when the tanks are drained, right?" Lysanias asked.

"The one is, yes. The glass breaking one, no."

"I was thinking we use your shield somehow," Gogo told him. "Simply get them out of here, then we leave. Naturally we do the Espers last, but I still have no idea how we would do it."

"I can think of a way," he decided after thinking a moment. "It'll take some fairly exact timing though. Do they all drain at once?"

"No, it's sequential. I could introduce a delay in the system, if that would help. But how are you going to use that huge shield to get the Espers out?"

"It's not the shield. It's the coin I've embedded in the shield that generates the portal. I

can take it out. It's a talisman, I can probably turn it off like I can the wards, at least temporarily. I push it through the glass, control it with metal bending, and the portal activates just as the liquid starts to flow in the tube. The Esper is sucked through, the liquid fills up the tube, and the system is none the wiser. I get the coin near the side of the tube, pull it out again enough to deactivate it so it doesn't cut a hole in the tube, and repeat the procedure."

"Can you do all that at once?" Gogo asked. "That's alchemy, modifying a talisman on the fly, metal bending, all at once."

"Maybe if I got some help from someone who can do what I do?"

"Thought you would never ask."

So with the plan in mind the group waited until the factory shut down a few hours from then. Both Lysanias and Gogo made wards, figuring they should have as many as possible. Cid told them he would sneak in and disable the power in the bay area, letting them steal the magitek armors. Lysanias shook his head and held up a hand. "Actually, I'll be wearing an *ignore me* ward and waiting outside the place. They aren't perfect, someone can still spot me if the one I use isn't good enough. But if I'm somewhere out of sight it won't matter. My spirit will go in with the wards, swipe the magitek armors, and bring them to me. There's no way anyone there will see it. Meanwhile you'll be opening the safe, Terra, Celes, and Gogo can then burn the records with fire magic. We'll meet up at the hallway outside the Esper holding area, I'll teleport us past the guards so they don't see us. We finish that part and we're home free."

The others agreed he knew his abilities better than they did, and after the factory had been quiet for some time they crept out. Lysanias' spirit had stolen some uniforms, Cid knew where they were kept, so now everyone looked like a soldier. They all wished each other luck and went to their tasks.

*The best part about this, Lysanias thought to himself as he watched his spirit affix another ward and suck in an armor, is that the actions of unseen things are overlooked too. When Don rescued Everest from the wanderers by cutting his bonds Everest didn't even notice until we told him he was free. So these people don't even notice the machines are vanishing right under their noses. They won't figure anything is wrong until the shift changes and new people come and see what's happened. I wish I could see their faces somehow, it would be priceless. "Where did all those huge machines go?" "What do you mean where did they go? They're right- Huh." Hhehehehe*

With the room now empty the pair walked the halls back to the Esper chamber, stopping into any rooms they could get into and swiping anything that looked interesting. They found everyone waiting for them, so he teleported them inside and got to work. Cid watched the system carefully, telling them which tube was about to be flushed so they could get into position. Lysanias had the coin out and floating, ready to shove against the glass and move it aside with his alchemy abilities. Gogo would handle that, and the return trip out of the tube. Terra was already in the dimension, so she could get the Espers out of the cave when they appeared. Lysanias hoped they would be okay, given they wouldn't have MP there either, but given it was being drained somehow anyway they would probably be fine. *They aren't damaged, strictly speaking, so cure wouldn't help. Or would it? My wards certainly won't, so I just hope they're okay.*

Only a small amount of liquid was lost getting the coin in and out, not enough to trigger the alarm, so while they had to work fast they got the rhythm of it and got all the Espers out of there. Cid realized there were two more in the "disposal" area and Lysanias zipped them through as well, completing the set.

"Anything else we need to do here?" he asked.

"I've got my tools and things in my inventory," Cid told them. "It was hard watching my research notes burn, but I know it was necessary. With no Espers, no notes, and me gone the empire's magic research is stalled, forever. Let's get out of here."

Lysanias brought them to the old hideout, which was still empty, and unstrapped the shield again to go in and see how the Espers were doing. "We'll be back as soon as we can,"

he told Cid. "You of course will stay here and guard the shield."

"I understand you don't want me there. If they recognized me..."

"Good. Stay here. We'll be back soon."

"I'll watch him," Vargas told them. "There's probably no place for me among Espers."

"That's up to you. Be back as soon as we can."

He vanished.

## Chapter 13

### Revelations of all Kinds

When: The time it took to walk through the cave later

Where: Personal Dimension, anchored to the hideout

Lysanias found no Epsers in the cave and so walked out, feeling at least a little better that he hadn't been met with a pile of bodies. The others, having popped in behind him, followed.

*What would happen if I kept shoving things in here and they didn't move, filling this space up? Would they eventually no longer fit, or would they sort of explode the place?*

The rescued Epsers were all there, laying or sitting on the grass just outside the cave. Terra was standing there, looking worried, and motioned the group over.

"They're pretty much out of it," she admitted. "I don't know if that's just because of what they've been through, or this place doesn't agree with them."

"Oh, is there something weird about this place?" Celes asked, sounding relieved. "I lost my MP, but I didn't want to say anything for fear you would think I was nuts."

"You're cut off from the laws of your physical reality," Lysanias explained. "Now you're under my rules. I don't have MP, so now you don't have MP."

"Can you access your inventory?" Gogo asked. "That's another thing you have that we don't."

Her eyes widened. "I can't! Where did it go?"

"It's fine, you'll reconnect with it once you leave," Terra assured them. "I did."

"You better be right, Terra!"

"Terra?" One of the Epsers, the most human looking one there, raised their head. "Did you say Terra?"

"Yes, I'm Terra," she told him, coming over to him. "You know that name? Do you know me?"

He stared up at her, longing clear in his eyes. "Has it been that long? An eternity I floated in that tube, helpless. You were only a baby when I saw you last."

"You do know me, don't you? Who are you?"

"Terra... I am your father."

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth. "Da-dad?"

"You've grown into a fine young woman," he managed, tears spilling down his face. "Your mother would be so proud."

"Dad?"

"Come here, daughter."

"Oh dad!" She threw her arms around him, crying as well.

"She's half Esper?" Gogo reasoned. "How did that happen?"

"Because Epsers were once human," said another, watching them with interest. This one looked exactly like a unicorn from Lysanias' dimension, though a little bigger and white. (The only one he met was a black one) "We became like this long, long ago, changed by the goddesses themselves. Quite by accident, if the stories are to be believed. Once they stopped feuding and let us live our lives, we joined the world at large. And for a time, humans and Epsers lived in peace. Didn't last though."

"It never does," Gogo agreed. "Peace, I mean. Are you okay? You going to make it?"

The unicorn shook their head. "No. Even if you hadn't rescued us, we weren't long for the world. At least this way we can die free."

"We can hold on a bit longer though," said another. "So they can have their reunion."

"As you say. Who do we have to thank for our freedom, by the way?"

"It was a group effort," Lysanias told them. "We all played a part."

"Humble. I like it," said one, the one that looked like an ice statue of a nude woman.

"Do we have any choice?" asked another, horned and with hairy arms.

"They must be against those that imprisoned us. You are, are you not?" asked the unicorn.

"We are. We've dealt the empire a major blow today, and we'll keep fighting them until the world is safe."

"I suppose we can entrust you with our power."

"But not yet," said the unicorn, struggling to rise. They managed it, but were breathing heavily, eyes closed.

"Are you okay?" Celes asked.

"I'll live. Come, let them have this moment at least. I'll tell you the story, you will need to understand where she came from. Come." They staggered some distance from Terra, and plopped down again. The others gathered around, waiting for the unicorn to begin. "We Espers exist even today," they began after a moment. "There is a singular gateway between what we call our realm, and this one. Not unlike that device you used to bring us here. This passageway is to the east, in the mountains. If I could ask a boon of you it would be to further seal this passage between the worlds, so that it could never again be opened. But I was telling the story of the past, not the future. Many years ago the gateway opened and a human woman stumbled through. Long story short, she was Terra's mother. She and Maduin there fell in love, and soon enough Terra was born. She was only a baby when the gateway opened a second time. This time troops of the empire stormed through, and grabbed those of us that were nearby. We hadn't needed to defend ourselves in hundreds of years, we were easily taken I'm sad to say. During this time Terra was also captured, and grew up apart from us. We've been experimented on in one form or another ever since."

"That's horrible!" Celes told them. "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"It's fine. Our rage burned out very long ago, along with most of the rest of us."

"No!" shouted Terra, and everyone looked over at her.

"Ah, he's told her," the unicorn said.

"What, what is it?" Gogo asked.

"There are two ways this can go," they explained. "A lingering death, here in this odd place. We wouldn't have the strength to leave, just walking over here was a struggle. This benefits no one, and wastes our potential. The second is a quick death, and compressing our remains into Magicite. This would allow us to come with you, and help you in your fight. Naturally, we would prefer the second method. Terra, no doubt having just been reunited with her father, would prefer the first. Despite the pain it would cause them both."

"What good are your remains, not to be crass," Celes asked them.

"We can teach you what magic we know, and be summoned in battle to aid you, should you need us. We are, each of us, expert in a particular type of magic. In this way our knowledge would not be lost."

"Even dead?"

"We would not actually be dead, in the classic sense of the term," the unicorn explained. "Simply not as mobile as we used to be. Oh, and one other thing. We can give those without the ability to use magic that ability. They would gain MP from bonding with us."

"Incredible!" breathed Lysanias.

"Could we talk to you during this bonding?" Celes asked.

"Not as such. You would simply absorb our knowledge of magic over time."

*Of course, they say "over time" but I bet they mean "through combats" as that seems to be how people get better at stuff around here.*

"I see. Wow, that would be great." Lysanias looked over at her like "Really?" "I mean it's terrible you would have to in a sense die..."

"It's fine. Better than floating about in those tubes, or that awful Cid person realizing our potential as Magicite. Who knows what he would have done with that knowledge?"

"That's my... You know what, never mind. He has been pretty awful, hasn't he?"

"So that is our story. Several of our number escaped a few days ago. Please, seek them out before the empire does."

"We will," Lysanias promised.

"Good. Now, allow me a moment to collect my thoughts before we do what must be done."

"Of course. And thank you."

They nodded, and looked around. Several minutes past, with Terra finally looking their way and motioning them over. The unicorn staggered back over, Lysanias wanting to ask if he

could help but unsure how. He didn't want to insult this being's pride, after all. But they made it.

"If there is any last request, speak it now," Maduin told them.

"Use us well," said one.

"Keep our secret from the empire."

"We will," Celes promised.

"My daughter, I'm sorry we only had moments. But know that as Magicite I will be beside you, always."

"Goodbye, dad."

"Goodbye, my daughter. Let it be done."

The Espers shimmered, and in their place dropped 8 faintly glowing stones.

"Oh dad," Terra cried, rushing and picking up his stone. "Oh dad." She hugged it, and the others silently went and gathered up the others.

A few moments later Terra composed herself and turned to the others. "What do we do now?"

"Immediately, or short term?" Gogo asked. "I can see why you would want to keep Magicite from Cid."

"But we have to tell Vargas. Adding another magic user to the group would be helpful."

"The problem is, that Esper that spoke to us said we would absorb their knowledge over time. We don't have the luxury of time at the moment."

"There's another Esper in the world," Terra agreed. "The one the empire forced me to go after."

"Exactly. With these Espers gone from the factory... no, call it what it was. The prison."

"Thank you," Terra said softly.

"With these Espers gone from that prison Kefka will waste no time heading there. May be there already, given he couldn't have known we would steal the ones he had. But adding another to his little collection? He would probably go himself, to make sure the job was done correctly."

"Good." Celes looked at her curiously. "You won't mind if I unleash the beast against him."

"Is that what we're calling it?"

"For now."

"Can you even control it? And you didn't remember what you did in that state. Maybe you won't come back the next time. Bringing you here snapped you out of it, yes, but can you take that chance? Is it worth losing yourself?"

"I don't know. Oh dad, I wish you could have told me more..."

"Perhaps I can help," Lysanias volunteered. "When I want to talk to the spirit of the mountain, I can go into a trance and enter my inner soulscape. The mountain is there. Maybe if you do the same thing to that Magicite, you can speak to the soul of your father. These crystals, they feel very strange to my senses. I don't know what that will mean out there. But we can make the attempt. What I do can't be so supernatural nobody else could learn it, right?"

"Oh, thank you!" she cried, throwing her arms around him. "Thank you!"

"Are we leaving immediately?" Gogo asked. "It's been a long day."

"We'll sleep at the base, someone's going to have to sleep on the floor-"

"Not it!" Gogo called.

"I'm sure we can come up with a fair-"

"Not it!" Terra called, putting her hand up.

"It's fine-"

"Not it!" Celes called, putting her hand up.

He sighed. "We'll make Vargas sleep on the floor. Tell him it builds character or something."

"Now you're talking," Terra said with a grin, then her face fell again. "Thanks, everyone. I have a lot of thinking to do, about all this. About who I am. Where I come from."

"It doesn't matter," Celes told her quickly, stepping before her and taking her shoulders.

“Just like it doesn’t matter if I have a twin sister, or if Cid is really my grandpa. We are who we are, not where we came from. Not who our parents were, or our pasts. This, right here, is who you are, Terra. Protector of the weak, titan who will topple an empire. After all, haven’t we already begun? That’s all that matters.”

“I guess. You’re still going to ask him though, aren’t you?”

“Duh. If he cost me a twin sister, well...” She stepped away and looked back over her shoulder. “I’ll stab him myself.”

So the group left the dimension and gave Cid the room by himself so they could talk. The mountain spirit watched the door, not that they didn’t trust of him course but...

Handing over a Magicite Vargas seemed to absorb it, and his eyes lit up. “I have MP,” he announced, and it was true. Lysanias could feel magical power from him now. The others did the same, Terra of course choosing her father. Lysanias and Gogo however, were left out. The Magicite didn’t respond to them at all, though both could feel the magic and life energy (such as it was in this reality) inside the stones.

“Figured it would be too much to hope for, getting some powers for myself,” Gogo sighed.

“But think of it this way,” Lysanias told them. “You can take some armor and Relics home that boost your physical abilities, at least. When you’re not in a place that requires you to do absolutely absurd amounts of physical damage to your enemies you’ll do okay for yourself.” *After all, it’s what I’m counting on as well.*

“That may be true.”

“Can you cast magic?” Celes asked Vargas.

“Not a bit of it,” he announced. “This stone has imparted the ability to do magic, but I know nothing of spellcraft. But I do know I could use my MP to summon this Esper in combat. We’ll have to try it.”

“I would be interested to see what happens. But how are we going to explain it to Cid?”

“Are we taking him into combat with us? The man is ancient!”

“He’s not *that* old. Besides, he’s the number one weapons guy for the empire. You don’t think he’s got some cool toys he didn’t share with them? Just in case? Come on.”

“Wait, will he fit into the party?” Terra asked.

“Well, I figure he will,” Celes told her. “Right now really there’s only you, me, and Vargas here. Cid will make four, the max party size. These two hangers on don’t count, so it should be fine.”

“Six people in combat! Seven with the spirit out. Hey, Gogo, could you call out a spirit?”

“I would have to go through the ritual and find out what my spirit is tied to,” they explained. “Then connect with it. Sometimes being able to do something someone else can do doesn’t mean I can just do it. I mean I could do it, but I’d only be able to call it out when Lysanias was around. And if we think adding another spirit to the battlefield would be helpful I can make the attempt, but right now we’re already bending the rules here, with almost double the normal numbers in combat. Let’s be content with that.”

“Oh.”

“But what about Cid?” Celes asked, hauling the conversation back on track.

“He’s a smart guy, he may put it together,” Vargas told them.

“If he does, fine. If not, it’s something Lysanias did,” Terra told them. “He’s seen him do all sorts of crazy things. This is just the latest.”

“Maybe he’ll buy that, maybe he won’t. I suppose we’ll need to raise levels anyway, and with Espers in inventory he wouldn’t see us absorbing them if we didn’t do it right out in front of him. We might be able to keep them secret.”

“For as long as we can,” she agreed.

So the group found some bedding for Vargas who agreed to sleep in the hallway outside Cid’s room. Just in case he walked around in his sleep or anything. The group then went to bed, where Lysanias dreamed.

In the dream, he saw three pillars upon the land. A pillar of fire, a pillar of ice, and a

pillar of earth. As long as the three pillars were in balance, the world flourished. But when a clown picked the lock of the candy factory and bumped into them, the fire pillar burned the world while the ice pillar froze the seas. The earth pillar broke apart and split the land.

He awoke with a start. *Watch out for clowns, I guess?*

With that the others woke up and joined him for breakfast.

“Oh, hope you don’t mind, Cid,” he told the man. “When I was walking through the place I picked up a box and shoved it full of stuff I found laying around. You guys can go through it. I call anything that provides boosts better than what I already have.”

He dumped the box out of the ward and they went through. There was some armor that seemed to literally be made of gold, a bad choice in his eyes given how soft gold was. Some swords with elemental properties, some items, and a Relic or two that weren’t very interesting at the moment. Cid said he had good enough armor and weapons at the moment thank you very much but took the leftover Relics just in case.

“So our plan is to head back to Narshe, take the one other Esper we know about off the table,” Celes told him. “We’ll... will the balloon hold all of us?”

“I’ll just fly alongside,” Lysanias told them. “That should be fine.”

“Fair enough. We’ll ride the balloon over the mountains like before, and walk the rest of the way. The monsters around here won’t give us much XP as we’ll need to raise our levels, but at least we can practice working together as a team. Plus as we walk you can tell me about... Maria, I think you said her name was?”

“Yes, Maria. Of course. Like I said, you deserve the truth.”

“Good. Then we’ll go after the escaped Espers, see what they have to say for themselves, and with no more magic power to draw off from we’ll await the emperor’s next move.”

“Expect them to hit hard and fast,” Cid told them. “With no more capacity for making Magitek armor and actually losing all the ones in for repair they’re going to rush to subdue all other major power centers in the world before their main advantage goes bust.”

“They leave those things sitting around, Lysanias can steal them. They’ll find using them in the field will lose them more than it’ll gain them,” she promised.

“How is he doing that, by the way? He can’t be putting them into inventory.”

“He has his own special inventory,” she told him. “Come on, let’s get moving.”

So the group left the cave, Lysanias shifting the rocks again that blocked the entrance, as Cid stared dumbfounded. But he really lost it when he passed Terra his armor to put into their inventory and grew wings, taking off into the sky.

“Who is that guy?” he insisted. “How is he doing all this? You can’t put a vehicle this size into inventory! Where did he even come up with the idea? I’ve heard rumors of airships but I’ve never built one. I’ve built everything around here.”

“Ah, ah, ah, grandpa. You owe me some answers first,” Celes chided him. “That was our deal, remember?”

“What do you want to know?” he asked, looking resigned.

“I think you know. Spill!”

“Very well. You were two years old when you were brought to me. I was told you were an orphan, and having refined the process I used on Kefka, was ordered to infuse you with magic.”

“Two? I was two!?”

“Yes. It was hoped a younger body and mind would be more successful at integrating magical power. If I may say so, I was completely right about that. You grew up without any trace of the madness that now seems to plague Kefka.”

“There may be another reason for that, but fine. You always told me you wanted me to be more like Terra, was that a lie?”

“I wouldn’t say lie, exactly. While I didn’t exactly know you I thought you might like to use magic.”

“But it didn’t matter what you wanted, you were ordered to do it.”

“True.”

“And this ‘twin’ of mine?”

“Naturally I’m not so sheltered to have not noticed another person running around the world that looks a lot like you. Again I had my suspicions but what could I do about it? Confront the emperor? I don’t think so.”

“But why do this?”

“Every experiment needs a control,” Gogo told her.

“A what?”

“Think about it. They needed to know if giving you magic changed you. What better way to do that than by separating twins, giving one magic, and seeing what happened?”

“While the other twin just so happened to get famous enough as a singer that I noticed her. Great. So my real parents are probably alive, think I’m dead, and I have a sister I never knew.”

“That’s highly likely,” Cid agreed.

“And you knew none of this?”

“Not at the time. I hope you believe me, Celes.”

“I want to, Cid. I want to.” She turned away, deep in thought.

Chapter 14  
Keeping Promises  
When: Afternoon of day 24  
Where: Near Narshe

So the group started learning more magic on the way to Narshe, now gaining something they called “magic points” in addition to XP. Apparently when they got enough of these points they learned a new spell, making Lysanias wonder if this whole world wasn’t some kind of joke by Inari. He also discovered calling an Esper in combat worked once, and once only, per fight. So it seemed his spirit was counted as an Esper on this world, and that’s why if it wasn’t out in combat he could only call it out for a single action. The rest accepted all this as perfectly natural and fought their way towards the city. When they got near they realized there was a problem.

“There must be two dozen magitek armor guarding the place,” Cid reported, looking through his field glasses. “Plus hundreds of soldiers, dogs, and is that a *ninja* I see down there? The empire isn’t messing around.”

“Can’t be a ninja, you wouldn’t see them,” Vargas said.

“At night maybe, he’s standing in the *white* snow!”

“Given both their natural magic users have left their ranks, I can see why,” Celes interrupted.

“And we never did meet up with the Returners,” Terra told them. “They could be making trouble for the empire in ways we don’t know about.”

“Whatever the reason, we need a plan,” Cid went on. “Unless you can fight your way through all of them.”

“You don’t think the Esper has been moved already do you?” asked Gogo.

“This must be the escort force, they would have left if that were the case. Without the Esper, what is there that is so valuable in town to station this many troops to protect?”

“It wouldn’t be a trap either,” Celes figured. “You wouldn’t have everyone out in the open like this if it was. No, they’re moving the Esper *now*.”

“Should we just wait to attack them?” Gogo asked. “They’ll have to come this way with it, right?”

“It would reduce civilian involvement,” Cid agreed.

“But once out of town, it’s basically flat land,” Celes protested. “You know how fast those things can move. They’ve probably rigged up some kind of sled to drag it behind a few of them. All they need to do is keep us busy and we’ll never catch them.”

“You want to just rush down there?”

“No, I think we need to come up with a plan. Lysanias, you’ve been here before. Can you teleport into town?”

“Sure, if you don’t mind the risk of teleporting inside something. I usually choose someplace nice and open so I teleport in and don’t die. We teleport into the streets of this place and who knows what we’ll end up teleporting into?”

“What about how we first left?” Terra asked him. “That secret cave exit you found?”

“That could work. It’s close, though I only saw it once. Actually, teleporting to that mine cart we hid under would be better. I doubt it’s been moved, I can envision us around it, given it was the only one I saw in this world.”

“Great. So we sneak into town that way and get close to the force moving the Esper. You can do the same trick, Lysanias, pull people out of the magitek armors.”

“Oh, it’s better than that. I have a plan once we get close enough.”

“But it still involves us messing things up here, right?” Terra asked.

“Of course!”

“Then I’m all for it. Let’s go before they get all the way out here and it’s a moot point.”

So the group got in a circle, half holding Lysanias and half holding Gogo, and he *shifted* to be in the tunnels again. *Of course, with the greater strength I’m getting from my equipment I could probably lift them all now, but let Gogo feel useful.*

Given the distance there was no way they could fail, and after building a set of steps up to the hole Terra originally fell down they moved through the tunnels, fighting the original

creatures he had seen. Soon they were out and on a bridge overlooking the streets of the town, where the Esper was being hauled.

"Whatever this plan is, you better hurry," Cid told them.

"Not to worry, I've got it covered." *Mountain spirit, you know what to do?*

*I do. Let us free this poor creature.*

*Just like Aang from the ice.* The spirit appeared down in the street and went over to the

Esper. It concentrated, using water bending to melt the ice off, which splashed in a huge puddle in the street. The armors, now holding on to a smaller thing which started to wake up and struggle jumped away from it. The Esper opened its eyes and wasted no time frying several with magic. Chaos erupted in the streets, as soldiers not in armor rushed to engage it.

"That's our cue," Lysanias told the others, holding out a hand. "Let's go help them out."

"Now you're talking," Vargas told him, and simply jumped down to street level.

"Or you could just do that?"

The others took hold.

Now down in the street the group engaged the soldiers as the Esper basically went berserk and fried anything that got near it. Things seem to be going well, but suddenly a bolt of lightning came out of nowhere and slammed into the Esper, knocking it over. Everyone looked to see where it had come from, and a man in a green cape and jacket, red pants, and clown makeup on stood there.

*The clown! Is that Kefka?*

"Someone's trying to steal my new pet," the man said to no one in particular. "That's naughty of them, isn't it?"

"Oh, very naughty," he answered himself. "They should be punished."

"I agree. Form up you morons," he yelled to the nearest soldiers. "You're all in my party now. And it's a party now!"

The group entered the now familiar "combat space" and Kefka stood there behind a line of soldiers.

"Wow, all my good friends are here," Kefka said to them. "Cid, and Celes, and Cid, and Terra, and Cid, and *what the heck are you doing here, Cid?*"

"I'm not working for you anymore, actually," he replied. "You've been out in the field too long, you've missed all the news."

"What news?"

"Oh, I won't spoil the surprise. But you may want to go see your factory when you're done here. If you survive, I mean."

"You traitorous swine! We gave you everything and this is how you repay us?"

"Everything including all the lies you told? I'm with my granddaughter now, she had the right idea in the first place."

"You know she's not even your... Wait a second." He looked the group over. "You know, I count real good up to four. But for some reason after I get to four I *keep going*. How do you have seven fighters in your group, and what in the world is that stone monstrosity?"

"You're really going to claim ignorance, huh?" Lysanias answered. "Give it up, it's over."

"Over? It hasn't even started! You know what? I don't like your face, I think I'll rearrange it. *Bolt 2!*"

"Oh yeah?" The magical energies bounced off the wall ring, smacking Kefka with his own spell.

"Ow. I see how it is. You'll pay for that."

"No, I think you will," Terra told him. "Fire!"

It bounced off *his* wall ring and hit her. He laughed. "You think I can't wear Relics too? I knew at least one magic user would be after me, so I took precautions."

*Vargas, everyone, don't call out Espers unless you're sure we can kill this guy. We don't want him to know we can do that,* he sent to the others. *Of course,* he thought to himself, *if this is the shadow avatar they must already know. But on the off chance they aren't...*

"Kefka, this battle is between us and you," Vargas told him. "Leave your soldiers out of it. Super Wind Tsunami Fist!" A huge wind blew from behind the group, sweeping the soldiers

out of the combat, but leaving Kefka who had simply been pushed back a little.

"Ah, who needs them?"

"Super wind tsunami fist?" Lysanias asked him.

"You name your attacks what you want, I'll name my attacks what I want."

"That's fair."

"Runic!" called Celes, holding her sword up.

"Oh, guess I can't use magic for a bit," Kefka pouted. "I know that one."

"But I can do this," Cid told him, pulling a chainsaw from nowhere and slashing into him. Gogo mimicked it, somehow pulling the thing from Cid's inventory despite not having access to it. (As it was a "tool" and not a "weapon" he did the same damage with it as well)

Kefka was now up again, he must have been wearing a haste Relic, he simply attacked Cid, smashing him with a mace of some kind. "I can't decide which traitor to kill first."

But Vargas was hasted too, and went again, slamming Kefka with an energy beam.

"You cheats!"

Now Lysanias was up, and he was in a bind. He could hit Kefka with bending, it was only considered magic for the purposes of damage. But at the same time if this wasn't the avatar, that would give away something else weird was going on. To hit him though would do nothing, so he couldn't do that either. *Actually, if I could get him through my shield he wouldn't have MP anymore. Wonder if he would still be crazy? Guess we could take the chance.*

He took the lid off his shield, dropping it beside him.

"I don't like the looks of that," Kefka muttered.

His spirit held, and Kefka went for Cid again.

"Cid, here!" Terra passed him a potion, which he drank down. "But don't think this means I've forgiven you."

Vargas pummeled him, and Celes refreshed her Runic ability, leaving Cid and Gogo to slam him with chainsaws again.

"This really isn't working out," Kefka decided. "This many against me? And Celes locking down my magic? I'm going to have to think of a way to deal with you. Tootles!"

He vanished from the battle, and the area changed back to the view of the city. The Esper was struggling to rise, and Kefka was jumping up into a Magitek armor, throwing the pilot out of the seat.

"Don't let him escape!" Terra called.

Lysanias grabbed his shield cover before it was lost, clipping it in place again.

"Don't you have a friend to see to?" Kefka taunted, pointing to the Esper. "And just in case- Bolt 2!" They got hit by lightning again, and he ran off in the machine, laughing all the way.

"Let's help him!" Celes decided, turning to the Esper. "We'll never catch him without our own armors. Cure!"

"Cure!" cast Terra as well.

"It's all right, little ones," said the Esper sadly. It was a like a huge bird, and stood at least twice as tall as the group. "Your hearts are pure, and I have been frozen in the ice for far too long. I sense that you carry Magicite, and I will join my brethren in that state to aid you. My time has passed, this world is not mine."

"Wait!" shouted Lysanias, but the Esper was already in the transformation. There was a flash and a shiny shone bounced to the ground.

"Well, we kept that a secret for what, eighteen hours or so?" Terra said, picking it up.

"What is that?" Cid asked hungrily.

"Later. We still have... or not." The other soldiers, seeing Kefka running for it joined in the exodus, following him out of town. "I guess we're okay here."

"Can I see that?" He made grabby hands.

"No." The stone vanished.

"Oh, Magicite, I see," he realized. "Now that I know the name of it I see it in inventory. Now what do you-"

"You touch a single one of those," Terra threatened, her blade out, "your HP will go so negative nothing will be able to bring you back."

"Very well, very well." He held his hands up, showing them empty.

As the soldiers ran the inhabitants of the town started coming out, and one person in particular strode up to them.

"This may seem like a stupid question, but can I see that rock the Esper turned into?" they asked.

"Why, of course!" Terra answered sweetly. "Even though you are a complete stranger to me, I have no problem handing this valuable thing over to you because you seem like a good person."

"Oh, rub it in why don't you?" Cid muttered.

Terra handed the stone over, and the man held it up to the light. "I thought so. I was watching from the window, that Esper turned into this. You're never going to believe this, but I have one of these!"

"What?" the group said.

"Yeah. Been passed down in my family for generations. You're against the empire, that much is clear. And given what they just tried to do, I'm sure this town will be as well, shortly. You want it?" He handed the Magicite back. "Come up to my shop, you can have it."

"That would be great!" Terra told him. "Lead the way."

With the streets clear the man took them to his shop, which turned out to be a weapon shop. "I'm a blacksmith by trade, myself," he told them. "Come on back, it's around here someplace." He searched through boxes and shelves, and finally came up with an old and cracked up Magicite. Terra got one out again and held them side by side.

"Huh, this one's pretty badly beaten up, now that I look at them like this," he mused. "I'm not sure it'll be that useful to you."

"Lysanias?" She handed the two over to him, and he weighed them in his hands.

"This one, it does feel more 'alive,'" he decided. "Whatever 'life energy' is in these stones has nearly left this one. But a spark remains. I could fuse the cracks together, that would be easy. Would putting spiritual energy into it wake it up, make it useful again? I don't know. Could shatter it."

"I could make a sword out of it," man suggested.

"What?" Lysanias knew a little about sword making from watching people back home, before the flood. "That would make the metal impure, and thus easier to break."

"Nah, nah," the man waved a hand. "I mean melt it down and use this as the core of a blade. I've been meaning to do it, just never got around to it. Trust me, I could make you something with pretty decent attack power."

*Right, things might not work the same way here. They have 'attack power' and their swords don't seem to get dull. I've never seen a sword sharpened anyway.*

"Would it raise stats?" Celes asked, because she knew what was important in life.

"By a fair amount," he promised.

"And I could augment your skill in forging," Lysanias realized. "Making this blade you would be the greatest smith that ever lived. It would be your masterwork."

"Would you be able to talk to the Esper in the core?" Terra asked, holding another Magicite. "Or would it be truly dead?"

"Couldn't be all the way gone," the smith assured her. "Then the sword wouldn't have the kind of power I'm claiming. If you can talk to them normally, I think you would be able to talk to this one too."

*The living sword Lady Inari promised me! Is this it?*

"Then I say the sword, and we give it to Lysanias," Terra suggested. "He'll get the most benefit from it."

"I have no problem with that," Celes agreed. "I got the fancy armor, after all, so it's only fair. We only learned about Magicite yesterday, and trying to repair it sounds pretty risky. Whatever spells we would learn from it we can probably do without, but a sword that raises his stats will really shine once away from here. What is more useful long term? I vote sword. Vargas?"

"I do not use the sword, so it holds no interest. On the other hand we have several Magicite already, do we not? To greedily grasp this one would not sit right with me. I haven't even begun to learn the magic from those we have, and for Lysanias to carry a part of this world with him in his travels seems right. He has earned a magnificent blade, and I know he

will use it wisely, and well.”

“Then the blade it is,” Terra announced. “Can you get to work immediately?”

“Of course!”

“I’ll take a look around town,” Cid offered. “Kefka probably doesn’t know the Esper died, and may come back with a larger force to try and take it again. Especially once he learns it’s one of the only ones left in the world. Lysanias, if you can get out some of the working armors I can instruct people to their use, and set up a new perimeter. One we control. I can also suggest some other defenses, based on what I know the weaknesses of the armor are.”

“Celes?” he asked.

“It’s fine. We’ll be watching him. You get your sword made, we’ll help secure the town. That done maybe we can stay here for a while, raise our magic points. The monsters in the tunnels are laughable at our level, but a couple of points per battle is a couple of points.”

“I would like to learn at least a few spells,” Vargas agreed. “Just to know it’s possible.”

“Very well, it’s your call. Let me get this taken care of, and I’ll be back to augment you so you can get started on the sword.”

“Of course. Some kind of magic?” Lysanias nodded. “Very well. I’ve got some scraps of adamant I’ve been saving, this seems like the time. I’ll get the forge warmed up and start melting things down.”

“Thank you.”

“Giving me an excuse to finally make something with this stone? Of course!”

So the group started helping the town build some defenses, and a few people agreed to learn how to pilot the magitek armor (it wasn’t hard). Lysanias went back to the blacksmith and augmented his skill, which amazed the man.

“What stats would you like enhanced?” he asked. “I can probably manage three.”

“Three! Strength, of course. Or *vigor* if you prefer. Can you have it increase my resolve?”

“What’s resolve?”

“My ability not to give up in the face of adversity.” *And it’s how I cast skyebourne magic. Willing it to do what I want. A lot of others powers too, so that seems the most useful.*

“Huh, I guess. What else?”

“How about my reflexes? I guess you would call it my speed.” *I’m already pretty fast but what else makes sense? My toughness? I’d rather just dodge and not be hit.*

“I can make you both faster of foot and faster at attacking.”

“That would be great!”

“I see you wear a sniper sight, want me to integrate the crystal into the blade too?”

“You mean make it so the sword will never miss? You can do that?”

“Exactly. I could make it do a critical attack by using your MP if you prefer.”

“No, let’s stay with the sniper sight,” he agreed, handing it over. “Will it count as a Relic, or can I wear something to replace it?”

“You could wear another to replace it.”

“Fantastic. Anything else? Anything you need from me?”

“No. I somehow know a lot more about weapon manufacture than I ever did, so that magic really did the trick. I’ll get to work.”

While he did, Lysanias went shopping, then got to work himself. He was going to take no chances with the blade, given the sacrifice the others had made for him. *I’ll fabricate it, as tough as I can, so it’ll never break no matter what. Then it won’t matter if other places consider the sword “brittle” or not, because my power will sustain the edge. What I bought should work for it, according to the book. I can enhance myself as well, sure I’ll be a little distracted trying to maintain two spells, but it should work. I’ll get that started and when he’s done forging, put it through that process and truly have the ultimate blade!*

The forging began.

Chapter 15  
Collecting Things  
When: Day 32  
Where: Narshe blacksmith shop

With a skill double that of a master smith, the blacksmith took a week to forge Lysanias a blade like no other. Into the grip he placed the sphere of light, taken from the sword he had been using that his parents had stolen for him. Lysanias had used his ability to reshape matter, forming it into a rod. They then inserted it into the grip, which was partially hollow. He then flowed it out so it was even, basically looking like two stripes running from the pommel to the guard, one dark silver, one shining light. The pommel itself was just the leftover solid light, formed into a faceted jewel like shape. Just above the grip went the crystal from the sniper Relic. This red crystal sat at the joining of the guard arms and the blade. The blade itself was double edged, long and straight as a ruler's edge. The melted down Magicite crystal was visible through the runes the smith had punched through the metal near the guard. He had tapped out a series of runes and Lysanias had simply lifted them off, making the crystal show though. The runes he read as "By this blade be ye transformed" which the smith just said came to him as he had started work. At the finish he ground the edge and polished the blade until it shone like a mirror, and when no more could be done the blade was reverently set into the first of the two circles of power Lysanias had been making that week.

"I give you sword Ragnarok," he said formally as he placed it. "Truly, I have never made a blade like it. Nor shall I again, I think. That magic you used on me really has allowed the forging of a blade unlike any other. I think it will serve you well."

"I know it will. But there is still one more thing to do." He went to the first circle and bent over it, about to energize it. The other circle, placed next to the first, was for his armor. He figured he had the time, and would give both the treatment while he had the chance. Both would be supernaturally strengthened to be nearly indestructible, and repair themselves should they somehow be damaged. Lysanias closed his eyes, putting his hand on the first circle he had made. He had used ground up turtle shells, metal filings, diamond dust, even simple stones and other things found around town that suggested durability to him. Done under the influence of the augmentation magic he was certain they were perfect. With the sword within he activated the talisman process, and the smith watched in amazement as the symbols within the circle wrapped around and sank into the blade. When it was done the Magicite that was visible through the metal glowed, and if you watched carefully, brightened and darkened in time with Lysanias' breathing.

He repeated the process for his armor, and with that the circles upon the floor had vanished, leaving no trace. Lysanias donned his newly hardened armor with a wave of his hands, metal bending it onto him. He looked the sword over again, knowing even with the size of the blade he would have no trouble picking it up, even without his other items. The sword itself would basically carry its own weight. *(If it works like the smith said!)*

*Together with Don I made what I consider a fantastic shield. Now I have an armor that will last all of time, and with this final piece, the sword Ragnarok, made with living crystal, I think I am truly ready for what the realities I visit can throw at me.*

"Well, pick it up," the smith commanded, not willing to wait even a second longer. "Give it a wave."

"Thank you for this," he told the man genuinely. "For letting me watch you craft this, and for the work you put into it. Ragnarok is truly a work of art."

"Ah, admiring it, eh? That's fine. Thought maybe you were worried it would bite you or something. And you say the blade will forever exist just like this? As shiny and new as it is right now? What you did will protect it?"

"For all time. The planet could explode and this blade would simply rocket away, unharmed."

"Amazing. Come on, pick it up!"

"Very well." Lysanias bent and the sword nearly came into his hand, but not really because it can't do that. He hefted it, bringing it up and stretching it out before him.

"How does it feel?"

“Light as a feather. Even without the sash and circlet, just holding it is increasing my strength, so if there was any doubt, put it out of our mind.”

“I never had a single one!”

“Good. Step back.” The man did, and Lysanias raised it, then brought it down in an arc before him. The blade turned an electric blue as it cut the air, trailing energy, and Lysanias nearly dropped it in surprise. “Did you expect it to do that?”

“I made it sharp, as sharp as I could,” he said in wonder. “It has a 255 battle power, it *couldn't* be higher. But this? Even with my increased skill I had no idea that would happen.”

“But what did happen? Why is simply being sharp making it glow like that?” He swung it again, and again there was a bright arc of blue electricity that trailed the blade.

“I can only guess. Look, this sword is fairly sharp, right? But the battle power is nowhere near 255.” He walked over and grabbed a blade from the rack. Giving it a swing nothing happened. “See, it doesn't do that. That's because it's simply moving the air out of the way as it passes. But that sword... does something different. What a sword is meant to do, better than any other. Cut.”

“Are you implying it's actually *cutting the air*?”

“What explanation would you give? That wasn't part of the design. I mean the glowing Magicite we can explain because you woke it up by putting that power into the blade. The light of the hilt we explain because you had that orb in the first place. The glowing red Relic crystal has no part of it. It's red, but that strange energy is blue. Where do you feel it comes from?”

“I don't know. Your guess is as good as any I would make.”

“I doubt it impairs the function. Here, cut this iron bar.” He went and got an iron bar, while Lysanias put the sash and circlet back on. The armor felt even lighter, like he wasn't wearing anything, and he wouldn't wait to see what running was like.

*I thought I was fast before? I don't think I knew the half of it.*

“Ready?”

“Ready. Remember, just focus on hitting the bar, you should be almost drawn to it from the sniper Relic.”

“Right.” *I have some skill in the blade myself, even without the Relic I'm sure I could hit something that's just sitting there.* He brought the blade down and easily sheared it in half, trailing sparks as it went. “I guess it works.”

“I guess so,” he agreed, eyeing the cut. “With that we're done here.” He walked over and picked up the sheath, a simple affair next to the blade. *I think I'll embellish it later, carrying a blade of this quality in a sheath that doesn't match seems wrong somehow. Something will come to me for a pattern.*

“I guess we are. Thank you again,” Lysanias told the man, sliding it home. He tied it on his belt.

“Strange that you can't just equip it like we do. Well, no one will mess with you when they see that at your side. Come see me before you leave, all right? I'd like to see the blade one last time. And you can tell me of the enemies you've defeated with it.”

“Of course.” *Not that I'm hitting anything around here with it, even as sharp as it is I'm sure it'll do next to no damage.*

Walking through town Lysanias noticed the changes everywhere. The place had beefed up its defenses thanks to Cid, and the man did have good ideas about things in general. Magitek armor now walked the streets to defend the place, rather than attack it. Lysanias had kept a few, just in case, but the majority were now out and stored in the mine for parts and reinforcements should it come to that.

His friends here hadn't been idle either. They had been “training,” both here and back in the stomach of that creature to gain levels and magic points. Terra had been working on controlling her transformation and found it linked to her magic points, draining them away the longer she was in Esper mode. She didn't forget any magic she had learned, but it seemed something was being lost to maintain that form. Once she realized she was in control now after she changed she started collecting them for boss battles. Transforming for regular encounters was just a waste.

As far as Magicite was concerned, any that wasn't in use by the group had been given to trustworthy individuals in town so several people now knew a few spells, from cure to poison. *So now there's two towns with magic users. Perhaps one day the whole world can be trusted with that power, and they seem to have learned their lesson. Right?*

They were waiting for him at the gates of town, Celes craning her neck to get a peek at the sword.

"It's done?" she asked.

"It's done," he agreed, sliding it out. "Take a look." The group gathered around as she hefted it.

"Several plus sevens, a bit of speed, wait, where's your sniper Relic?"

"Oh, that's right!" He put his hand to his eye. "I need to pick up another Relic to replace it. The one I was using went into the sword."

"You made a sword that can't miss?" Vargas scoffed. "Do you not trust your own skills?"

"Hey, if you're making the ultimate sword, the sword you're going to use for the next hundred years or so, you make *the ultimate sword*. Besides, what if I needed to hand it to someone that didn't know how to use the sword? I would rather they not chop their own foot off, or worse, me, by accident."

"Ah, I see what you mean."

"Let me quickly run to the Relic shop. Though I suppose I could just put the shoes on, but speed doesn't mean so much around here. I'd rather have something more useful to the group. Do we have something good?"

The others considered. "Cid?" Celes asked. "Did you bring any you could share?"

"I don't wear it because it looks a little girly, but I do have a Gale Hairpin," he told them.

"What's it do?"

"Gives a 10% chance to strike first in battle."

"Let's see it." He got it out. "It does look a little girly."

"It is a hairpin, after all," Terra teased him, taking it. She stuck it in his hair. "There, I think it looks fine."

"Sure it does," Celes snorted, trying not to laugh. "It's fine, it's totally fine. Manly."

"If Terra thinks it's fine, then it's fine," he told her. "Anything else we need to do around here? Otherwise we can get going."

The group looked confused but Cid spoke up first. "We haven't decided where we're going yet."

"Oh, but we have. I know a little girl who would *love* to learn some magic. And now we have the means."

"Relm!" Terra guessed.

"Exactly. Spinning Right Round Relm. All week I've been asking where the escaped Espers are, and every time I get a heading that points back to Thamasa. So we'll head that way, give Relm a little time with a Magicite to learn a spell or two, and poke around the area. They may even be there, drawn to the magic users."

"How are we going?" Celes asked. "Balloon or just heading there directly?"

"Seems a shame to waste all this new strength of mine," figured Lysanias. "If I can have my sword back I'll take us there."

"Right, your sword. Of course, how foolish of me, what a dummy I am, I have to give it back to you."

"So if you could just hand it back?" He held his hand out.

"Sure, just hand it back. Best sword in the world. It's yours, after all. You helped make it. Why would I want it anyway?"

"Celes?"

"Fine, fine, here you go." She handed it back, but struggled a little with herself to actually let it go.

"Thank you." He held out his other hand and she took it, the others grabbing on as they were able. "Let's go." He *shifted*.

The group found themselves by the tree Lysanias had envisioned, and this time there was no one there to chide him for teleporting into the town. He sheathed the sword and the group made their way to Relm's house, knocking and again being let inside.

"Ah, welcome back!" Strago told them. "Come to do some more shopping?"

"Actually, we've come for two reasons," Terra told him. "Is Relm here?"

"HEY RELM!"

"I'M COMING OLD MAN!"

"A simple yes would have sufficed." She stuck a finger in her ear and wiggled it.

"That was easier."

Relm came into the room from the back, looking like her usual cheerful self. And covered in paint as usual. "Hi everyone! What's up? Find any more brushes for me?"

*You know, I have to wonder if she paints because she really enjoys it, or because she wants to stay away from kids her own age, and that's her excuse? She already admitted to being teased for not having MP, hence my wanting to come here right away. Has she grown a hard shell because that's just who she is, or because she's actually just really lonely?*

"Something better," Terra told her, kneeling down to her level. "How would you like to learn some magic?"

"You yanking my chain, lady?" she asked sourly. "Because I don't have MP like we said before so I- what's that?" Terra had gotten out a Magicite with a smile, and held it up in two fingers.

"The answer to your problems. Go ahead, take-" She started handing it over and then pulled it back. "Oh, wait. If you had the choice would you want to learn cure magic or attack magic?"

"Oh. I guess day to day, cure magic is more useful."

"Then cure magic it is." She switched them out. "Here, take it."

"Wait, why not Shiva?" Celes asked her as Relm reached for it. "Then she can learn some attack and some cure at the same time."

"Oh, good point!" she swapped it again.

"So can I take this one?" Relm asked, arms crossed.

"Yes! Go ahead." She reached for it. "Wait, unless-"

"Come on!"

She laughed. "Here you go."

"Finally. So what am I supposed to do- Oh!" The Magicite went into her, and her eyes lit up. "Oh wow, I have MP. I really, really do! Grandpa, I have MP!"

"What was that?" he asked.

"You're welcome to some too, if you want," Terra told him. "You'll have to get into combats-"

"I would come anyway, to make sure Relm stays safe."

"Of course. In that case you can pick from our current stock and we'll help you learn some magic." She set them all down on the table.

"But what are they?"

She sighed. "The remains of Espers. Apparently they can turn into this, which allows them to pass their knowledge and power on to others. This one," she touched one, "was my father."

"I see, so you're part Esper? Interesting. You'll have to tell me more later, Relm seems eager to get started."

She was by the door, unable to keep still. "Come on you slowpokes! Let's go!"

"We'll have to sit this out," Cid told Vargas. "As the majority of us have to obey the laws of physical reality around here, and that would make six locals in combat. Maybe you can show me around town?"

"Very well. Good hunting, all." They left the house (after gathering up the Magicite of course) and started towards the edge of town.

"We're actually on the lookout for some other Espers that escaped the empire's facility," Terra told him. "We have reason to believe they might be around here someplace."

"Humm." He looked thoughtful. "There is one place they could be. The reason we settled here all those years ago. Not just because it was somewhat remote, but because there

are strong magical energies coming from the caves nearby. We could check there, we'll have to wander around to get Relm her magic, we may as well have a destination in mind."

"I haven't left the town in ages," Relm admitted. "Someone says it's too dangerous."

"With the increase in monsters lately, he's right," Celes told her. "Don't think of sneaking out to do any extra monster hunting by yourself. We'll have plenty of time to get you more magic later, this is just Lysanias being nice."

"That quiet guy? This was his idea?"

"It sure was."

"Thanks, mister!"

"Sure thing Relm. I hope this makes your life a little easier, so you won't get teased as much for not having spellcasting ability."

"It should. Wait, here we go!"

The group ran into their first random encounter, and Lysanias got some teasing of his own.

"Hey Lysanias," Celes said to him after the combat was over.

"What?"

"A little ten year old swinging a paintbrush around just did more damage in combat than you did with your fancy new sword!"

"Don't rub it in."

"Maybe I should take it while you're around here, you know, get the most use out of it." Her hand twitched towards it.

Lysanias put a hand on the hilt. "I'll just hang onto it, if it's all the same to you."

"Suit yourself. I mean we might just run into something we can't handle, and that sword might have saved us."

"I don't think that's the case."

"You don't know."

"I'll ask when we get back to town."

"Spoilsport!"

The cave was probably three hours away on foot, but Relm was excited to keep going. She was sketching and controlling monsters up a storm, which was actually a little disconcerting to Lysanias when she first did it.

"Baskervor," she called, targeting one of the two in the battle with them, "by your name I command you!"

The group then beat the snot out of the other one, carefully attacking only the one not under control. Relm made the one attack the other, and then when it was gone, everyone waited for her turn again.

"Now, destroy yourself!" The creature obeyed, offing itself and vanishing. "Ha ha! Take that, sucker!" She did her victory dance with the others while he just looked a little nauseated.

*What is this, a demon in the shape of a little girl? And she looks really sinister with that mustache plastered to her face, like a little old man running around instead of a ten year old girl. Who came up with that shape for it, and what were they thinking?*

The party fought their way through the cave to where Lysanias started to feel magical energy emanating from. This turned out to be three golden statues, which Strago was quick to point out were fairly ancient. It turned out that the Goddesses of this world, of which there were three, had sealed themselves away after a big war by turning themselves into stone. To pay homage to them the Espers at the time created these statues which had taken on some aspect of their power. None of these people knew the phrase "that which holds the likeness of a weeping angel becomes an angel" but they got the idea. It also represented a promise to keep the original Goddesses, still the source of magic in the world despite being stone, away from those who would abuse that power.

"The statues then vanish from history," he concluded. "Perhaps they reside with the Espers now, in their realm. Who can say? They must be nearby, we can all still do magic after

all. Had they passed from our realm entirely magic would have been lost completely.”

*Making this world easier to destroy. I bet the shadow avatar is after them, then. I wonder...*

“You think these statues would have drawn the Espers here?” Terra asked.

“It’s worth a look, we’re almost through to the top of this cave system. Let’s be on our way.”

And there they were. Four Espers: Ramuh, Kirin, Siren, and Stray. They jumped at the group’s sudden appearance in the cave, but didn’t attack.

“You have Magicite,” declared Ramuh, stepping up to the group. He looked fairly human, appearing as an old man with a beard that reached the floor. He held a staff that sparkled with energy, and his green robe looked tattered and worn.

“Yes,” agreed Terra, seeing no reason to hide the fact. “We rescued the others from the empire, and they decided to entrust us with their power. They were too weak to fight the empire directly, so this was the next best way they could help us.”

Strago was holding Relm back, clearly ill at ease being near these creatures, weak as they were. Three were at least up and about, the fourth was asleep or near death and hadn’t stirred.

“That figures,” Stray grumped. He looked like an upright cat, the size of a human. “We break out and a day later someone comes to rescue us.”

“Now, now,” soothed Kirin, a huge beast with golden horns and a green mane. “They couldn’t have known, and neither could we.”

“Are you all right?” Celes asked them. “The other Espers could hardly move after we rescued them.”

“The magic here has helped sustain us,” Ramuh admitted. “But honestly we will not last. Still, how are we to know you are any better than the empire?”

“They can hardly be worse,” Kirin told him.

“True. And they have Magicite, meaning they already have a variety of spells at their command.”

“Besides,” Stray put in, “we held out for years in those tubes. If these people hadn’t rescued our fellows, the timing is certainly strange. Could the empire have *just now* figured out how to force us to become Magicite? After all these years? I think not. They’re telling the truth.”

“I suppose we can only put our trust in you,” Ramuh decided. “Come, bring Siren and let it be done.”

“We escape only to give ourselves up to others.” Kirin shook his head. “What a world.”

“Perhaps that is our fate.” The three gathered around the out of it Siren and suddenly there were four new Magicite for the group to use, and they reverently gathered them up.

“Mission accomplished,” Celes announced. “Let’s head back down and stay near the entrance. We can get some more XP and magic points today.”

“Real Espers,” Strago said with a shake of his head. “I never thought I would actually hear one speak. I must thank you for the opportunity.”

“Of course,” Terra told him. “It’s just too bad they were so weakened from having their magic drained away. What would they have been like in their prime?”

“We can only guess, my dear. Come.”

So the group spent the rest of the day in the area, letting Relm and Strago learn some new spells. That night they stayed at the Inn, and discussed staying another day or two to get some time in with the new Espers before moving on. Lysanias saw no problem with that, and the group went to bed satisfied they had done some good that day.

In the night, Lysanias dreamed.

Chapter 16  
Cleanup Before the final Chapter  
When: Moving into Day 33  
Where: The dream

In the dream, Lysanias stood in his soulscape, at the base of the great mountain that was the defining feature there. His mountain spirit stood beside him, and he looked around.

"That's odd," he remarked.

*My apologies. Usually you need to decide to come here, but this was urgent. I knew of no other way to get you a message. I'm glad this worked.*

"That's all right. What's going on?"

*There's something I think you should see. Come.* The spirit started to grow, and when big enough scooped Lysanias up in a huge hand. It continued growing until it was the size of the mountain itself, and shoved Lysanias forward toward the peak. Lysanias was somewhat surprised to see the sword Ragnarok hanging there, unsupported. It slowly turned in midair, point down, nearly balanced on the point of the mountain that now seemed almost to be reaching for it.

"When did this get here?"

*Just as you empowered the blade with your spiritual energy. It appeared, but has been quiet. I have tried talking to it, but either it considers me not worthwhile to communicate with, or it cannot.*

"Hey, you were here first. I can't believe it would think itself better than you. Besides, you're a part of my soul. This whole place represents it. If this sword is here, does that mean this is the spirit of the blade? It too has become part of my soul?"

*I know not. This is not within my experience.*

"I understand. Bring me a bit closer if you can."

*I can.* The hand moved and Lysanias was now standing next to the blade. He reached for it, laying a palm on it. The spinning stopped but nothing else happened.

"Ragnarok, it's me, Lysanias. Speak to me, why have you come here?"

There was no answer.

He felt it out, or at least tried to, as this whole place was just his soul, and in a dream to boot. "Feels asleep, I guess? Do you feel threatened by it? I don't know how I would remove it, but if you don't feel safe with it here..." *It is literally hanging over you.*

*That is not my concern. We are all one, here. If we can be said to exist at all, given we are just representations of varying aspects of your power. I just thought you should know that some aspect of that sword now resides in your soul, just as I do.*

He took his hand away and the spinning started up again, slowly turning there in the air. *The fact you even realize all that must mean something, but I'm not sure what.* "I appreciate the warning. I'll ask Inari before moving on, in case taking this sword out of this world does something to it. I'd hate to leave it behind, but I know Celes would probably do anything I asked in exchange for it."

*She does seem to like unique and powerful equipment.*

"Are you calling my equipment unique and powerful?"

*The sword, yes. But I was talking about the armor she still wears.*

"Oh, of course! I knew that. The armor. Totally clear. Just testing you. Making a joke. I have to go now."

*Very well.*

Lysanias was lowered and the spirit shrank again.

*One other thing. I know where the gate is to the Esper's realm. I can lead you to it, should you wish to seal it as requested by those first Espers we met.*

"That should probably be our next destination then. With the loss of his Espers, Kefka is going to start looking for more to restart the factory. Given he had some, and Terra, it's no doubt the empire knows where it is. We should do everything we can to make sure it stays sealed."

*Indeed. While the captured Espers were willing to give up their lives to help us, and give those that do not have it this "MP" they impart, I doubt the ones living their lives in their*

*own realm would be so eager.*

"I agree. Plus if we can get there first we might set a trap for anyone that comes looking for it."

*Whatever you think is best. I can simply show you the way, given the gateway resides inside a mountain.*

"I shall call upon you tomorrow and you can point us in the right direction."

*Very well.*

He woke up.

The next morning at breakfast Lysanias spoke up. "My mountain spirit spoke to me in a dream last night. Apparently they can show us the way to the sealed gate. As those Espers we rescued seemed to think it was a good idea that gate stay sealed, I thought we might go there and do the job."

"What were you thinking?" asked Gogo. "Alchemy? Bending?"

"Won't know until we see what it's made of, and how it would be opened. If it's some kind of metal door we can plaster it with 'ignore me' wards, raise *another* door in front of it, weld the two together so they don't get wet, and then pull a ton of rock down on top of it. It's inside a mountain after all, so there should be plenty of rock to use to seal it up further."

"That would do it," they agreed.

"But what about the empire?" Cid protested. "We have to stop them!"

"I have to stop the shadow avatar, that's actually all I'm interested in. I figure the empire knows about the gate, we can set a trap for them there if we can make it there first. Kefka was at Narshe, trying to make sure the Esper didn't get away. You can bet he'll be at the gate sooner or later to try and get more for their research program. If killing him takes the empire out of action, great. If not, well, your political problems are your own."

"We would have to kill the emperor," Cid told him. "Though he might come too, given the importance of what would be happening."

"Would that even help?" he asked, curious. "I mean there must be someone to replace him, right?"

"The empire spans a continent," Celes reminded them. "Even killing the guy at the top, there's still thousands of soldiers, generals like Leo, scientists, aids, he's right. Someone would swoop in to take power."

"But even if someone did, the empire now gets weaker with time, not stronger. They have no way to make magitek armor, and no people with magic on their side. It might even go back to being good for the world, not bad."

"That would be expecting a lot, Cid," Celes told him.

"You just want the empire's resources to continue your pursuit of science," Vargas rightly guessed.

"Maybe I do. I'm sure I could come up with some kind of substitute for magic to make the armors work. They could be useful for other things than war, you know? Hauling heavy loads, building large structures, rescue operations..."

*Wonder if I should leave them one of the Korra units to study? That could probably provide them some clues.*

"I suppose without magic everyone could build them, maintaining a balance of power," he agreed.

"What about me?" asked Relm.

Everyone turned, she was standing there by the door.

"I don't think you should come," Terra told her. "It will be pretty dangerous."

"I couldn't really join your party anyway, unless musclehead or gramps there stayed behind."

"Musclehead?"

"Gramps?"

"You heard me. I was talking more about Magicite. I only got a day to kick monster butt and learn magic. That was hardly enough to master Shiva's spells, I've still got one to learn! Are you just going to run off on me now?"

"We'll be back-" Terra started to say.

"You hope! What if you get captured, or worse, killed? Where does that leave me?"

The others looked at each other and Lysanias patted the table. She hopped up and Lysanias looked at her. "How about this," he began. "And tell me if I'm out of line here, guys, but I think she has a point. Something could happen to us, so this is what I propose. Choose what Magicite you want for our trip to the gate. If we do run into Kefka there we'll want their power, despite the risk of it falling into empire hands should we fall. It'll be mostly in the balloon anyway so you're not missing magic points. We'll leave the rest in the care of Relm-" *wait, is that a bad idea?* "-s grandfather. He can distribute them around the town like we were doing for Narshe. That includes you, Relm. That way if we fall, this town can take up the responsibility of safeguarding the Magicite. They can already use magic after all, so they're good at keeping secrets here. But this way they can learn any spells they've lost over the years. Or ones they've never had, I guess. While we're gone if you can get some people together and form a group I'm sure your grandfather will let you keep battling monsters. You didn't do too badly with us, after all."

"You mean it? You would leave them with us?"

He looked over to the group who seemed to be considering it. There were no major objections so they all nodded.

"It's a big responsibility," he cautioned. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I won't let you down! Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Of course. I don't know if we're leaving today-"

"We could probably stay another day, keep learning our own spells," Celes suggested.

"It will take Kefka a while to get back to Vector, learn his factory is destroyed, then head to the gate. He has to travel by ship, after all. He's probably just making it back there now."

"Sure, but is he closer to it in Vector?" Cid asked.

"Oh. Good point," Lysanias admitted. *Spirit, if you can answer a question for us?*

*You know I cannot speak, but I know how to answer your question already so I will come.*

The spirit appeared, and held up 2 fingers. "Seems we're two days away by balloon. Do you want to stay here an extra day?"

The spirit vanished again.

"Can you? Can you? Please say you can!" Relm pleaded.

"I guess," Terra decided for the group, because how could she say no to that pouty bat face?

"Yay! Grandpa should be coming along, he's a slowpoke so we can go out again! Yay!"

So the group sorted the Magicite, deciding what they would learn that day, what they would leave behind, and what they would take with them. The group didn't actually need him or Gogo there so he stayed behind this time, doing his own training. He also discussed their plan to leave Magicite there with the village elder.

"And you say just holding this crystal will allow a person who can't do magic to do it, and learn a bunch of spells?"

"That's right. We've proven it over in Narshe, a bunch of people there now have MP and can do a few limited spells."

"I'll be. And you're willing to leave some with us in case you get captured when you assault the gate?"

"It's a fair guess Kefka will show up sooner or later. I'd rather as few fall into his hands as possible if he somehow manages to take us."

"Good plan. Hmmm, I suppose in that case we had better prepare. Your group falls, sooner or later they'll come for us, too. If the empire is occupying towns on the northern continent, they'll be coming here sooner or later. We'll have to be ready for the world noticing us again."

"At least there will be less Magitek armor units for you to worry about. I do agree though, if there are high level people around here that don't mind doing a bit of wandering around outside with the Magicite, let them."

"I will. Thank you for your trust in us."

“Of course. This is just adding to what you already have, so it’s not that big a deal. But if you do hear anything about a crystal like this, take it seriously.” He patted his sword. “The smith that made this had one, didn’t know what it was. Who knows if others have been put into dusty old boxes or used as paperweights over the years?”

“I’ll have everyone look around, now that we know what they look like. Who knows!”

So the group said goodbye the next day and started for the empire’s land, following the direction of the mountain spirit. The villagers there wished them luck, Reml hugging everyone and feeling sad, probably thinking she would never see them again. Strago shook their hands, thanked them again for the loan of the Magicite, and promised they could have it back when they returned.

They crossed the veldt, heading south west towards an absolutely massive mountain range in the distance. Flying high up and looking at it with the telescope showed it was basically an island just off the coast and essentially just a mountain range sitting in the water. There was some coastline they could land on but not much, and Lysanias was glad the spirit could guide them because with that mountainous an area they would never have found the gate otherwise.

The morning of the second day Lysanias got the bright idea to ask about the empire, and of course put the dragonfly spirit on to aid him before he started.

“Will the empire be there when we make it to the gate?”

There was no answer

*Will we not make it to the gate?* “Will we see Kefka when we arrive at the gate?”

Yes

“He’ll be there,” he told the group, coming out of it. “We should discuss our strategy.”

“What strategy?” asked Vargas. “We pummel him with our strongest attacks before he can escape again.”

“I agree,” Celes added. “We use our Espers, our strongest spells, Terra uses her trance ability to augment her magic. We hold nothing back, especially if we can catch him with his back to the gate. He’ll have nowhere to run.”

“Oh, I was thinking about having Lysanias pull a Magitek armor out for me,” Terra protested. “After all, I’ll be able to make the best use of it.”

“I see. That could work.”

“Use lightning magic on any that are against us,” Cid told them. “There’s bound to be some there, and they’re weak to that.”

“I’ll just pull out the pilots,” Lysanias told him. “It worked before. But keep it in mind, I suppose.”

“I can double the amount of Espers we can call,” Gogo reminded them. “If you guys can summon one right before my turn I’ll just mimic it, and they’ll be called again. It will take some coordination but I think it’ll be worth it.”

“Should I be on the defensive again?” Celes asked. “I can keep Kefka from using magic.”

“If it comes to that, sure,” Terra agreed. “Right now Lysanias and Gogo have wall rings, so Kefka can’t target them. We’ve got the HP to spare and can heal, I say Vargas is right. We just go all in on damage at the start.”

“Er, can’t you just mute him?” Vargas asked.

“If he doesn’t have a wall ring on, maybe. It’ll never work at half strength.”

“Ah, true. He did last time.”

“Exactly. You’ll just have to hit him, or cast on Lysanias or Gogo, Celes.”

“Of course, if I got a better sword...” she trailed off pointedly, looking at Lysanias.

“You have a decent sword,” he reminded her. “It does a free spell a quarter of the time and increases your magic damage by a little. Also it would do extra damage to anything

mechanical if what Cid was saying is true.”

“What, her thunder blade? Sure will! It’s lighting elemental by itself.”

“You see? This blade was made with me in mind, apart from the attack power it won’t do much for you, because it was made to raise my ‘stats’ not yours.”

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

*Oh, I can. Watch me.*

“So what else?” Terra asked. “Obviously you’ll have your mountain spirit out.”

“Of course. I can support a few other spirits as well, as we get closer I’ll call them and ask for their help.”

“Like that wind spirit that one time?” Vargas asked.

“Exactly. I know three; moon, hawk, and wind. Moon wasn’t a fighter as such, at least before, but the other two were. The wind spirit I got last time was willing to help, I don’t think it’ll be a problem. I can support both, so that’s who I’ll call.”

“So that will be the four us, you, Gogo, the spirit of the mountain, the spirit of wind, and the spirit of something called a hawk? Nine people in a combat that should only have four. I think it’ll be a slaughter,” Vargas predicted.

“Just try not to kill any regular soldiers,” Lysanias pleaded. “Blow them away if you can, or let them run. They aren’t the problem.”

“If they attack me they most certainly are a problem.”

“Hopefully I can pull them out of the armors. Once on the ground maybe the fight will go out of them.”

“I suppose the empire is full of cowards.”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” Celes asked angrily.

“I mean that most of the soldiers of the empire were probably conscripted. They did not volunteer because they had great love of the state. So why would they give their lives for that cause? They would not. Having nothing else to fight for in the face of overwhelming odds they would simply flee.”

“While you would fight for the glory of it, and even if outnumbered stay to the bitter end, I suppose.”

“Of course! My art demands no less.”

“Then your art is stupid.”

“Mine is a glorious tradition, handed down from father to son for generations!”

“Didn’t you kill your father?”

“Okay!” Gogo stepped between them. “We are in a tiny basket and if you two are going to come to blows, we’ll water bend you a nice ice sheet to stand on. Otherwise cool it!”

“Tell him that!”

“Tell her... Never mind!” He turned away. After a moment he spoke again. “I left my father for dead, yes. But I did not deliver the killing blow myself. I suppose that makes me a coward, as well. There is a chance his HP was not depleted enough and he drank a potion after I departed. He would live still.”

“I can ask, if you want to know one way or the other,” Lysanias offered.

He considered. “No. If he lives, my heart will be gladdened, but I have thrown away my right to call him father. He would not wish to see me after what I did, and rightly so. No, it is better if I carry the shame with me, so that I may continue to strive for redemption in my own way.”

“If you change your mind before I leave, let me know. The offer is always open.”

“Thank you.”

“In any case, I’m with Lysanias,” Terra told them. “Try to get anyone else off the field so we just have Kefka, and maybe as a bonus the emperor to deal with. We don’t have an issue with individual soldiers, and there’s no cause for them to lose their lives in a pointless battle.”

“My fear is these will be the elite of the army,” Cid told them. “They wouldn’t use just anyone for a mission of this magnitude. Capturing more Espers? No, these are going to be loyal troops that can be trusted. They wouldn’t run, even getting them out of the armors.”

“But they can be forcibly removed from the combat,” Vargas reminded them. “Leave that to me.”

“I hope you’re right.”

And the group sailed on.

## Chapter 17

### Boss Battles

When: The next day

Where: About to reach the sealed gate

The mountain spirit, out so that it could tell the group when they were getting close, held up a hand.

"I think this is it, everyone," he called, perking the group up. "Check your equipment and we'll get going."

"And how are we getting down again?" asked Vargas, looking over the side of the balloon.

"I'll head down there in my 'spirit form' and look around. That way I can just teleport us all down there. The balloon will be fine, it'll just drift and I can come back for it later. I'm fast enough, it won't be a problem."

"That seems reasonable."

So he chanted for the spirit of the dragonfly and sat down to relax, sending his senses outside his body and zipping around the mountain range. He saw a large force of people in one place and went over there, looking them over. They seemed to be constructing a large bridge using a ragged old wooden one as a base, probably to hold the weight of the Magitek armor that were waiting there. Across the bridge was a huge metal door blocked by what appeared to be a landslide, and soldiers were over there trying to clear it. Others were patrolling, welding beams together with some kind of canisters that were shooting fire out, or giving orders. A man in green and another man by his side in a crown watched the entire proceedings. There was another man nearby, a tall man with dark skin wearing all green. He seemed the most bored of the group.

*Don't know who you are, but the other one is clear. That must be the emperor. He actually came to oversee this. I guess maybe they will get their wish today? Looks like they want to march the heavy gear over there to help move that rockslide, but that rickety wooden bridge won't hold them. It's a good thing, they might have already been inside if not for that.*

He zipped back to the balloon after a moment of fixing the scene in his mind.

"They're all there. The emperor, and some dark skinned man next to him."

"General Leo," Celes told them. "He's an honorable man, or at least he started out that way so I've heard. He's changed in recent years."

"We all change," Cid lamented.

"I'm not convinced."

"I'm going to do my chants, everyone get ready in the meantime."

He called for the two spirits, wind first then hawk, and thanks to the help of the dragonfly got them both after 5 minutes. Again the wind spirit was wispy and hard to see, but the hawk spirit looked like something you might find in a random encounter. It started circling the balloon, ready for action.

*Good thing we tried this before. We can leave them here and they'll get dragged into any combats because they're 'attached' to me. They seem fairly mindless here, just doing what I summoned them for, and not really talking like Korra's spirits did. I think because those were actual spirits, while these are just sort of representations of spirits my power called up. However it works, it does, so that's all I care about.*

"Everyone ready?" he asked.

"You've got the ward with the armor in it?" Terra asked.

"Right here, ready to get out," he told her, holding it up.

"You're sure you won't hand over that sword?" Celes asked. He had it out to help with the teleport, and he figured arriving with it would at least be somewhat intimidating, right?

"Very sure."

"Fine. I'm ready."

"I stand ready!" Vargas told them.

"I'll get my payback for the empire using my science as they did," Cid promised, hefting his chainsaw.

"Let's do this so I can get home," Gogo agreed. "Not that it hasn't been fun, mind you."  
"To victory!" Terra said, putting her hand out.  
"To victory!" the others shouted, joining hands. Lysanias *shifted*.

The group appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the enemy camp, right next to Kefka and the emperor. That many people caused quite an outrush of air, and work stopped to see what had caused such a noise.

"We are here to put an end to you!" Vargas said, posing and pointing at Kefka. "Face us in honorable combat!"

*Or not so much, given I'm about to do this.* "Release!" Lysanias held up the ward, letting the armor out, which Terra jumped into using the dragon boots. She paused, changing her Relic once in the cockpit, and it came to life.

"You'll pay for enslaving me, Kefka!" she roared. "Attack!"

As she charged the man Leo jumped too, but away from the two. He landed some distance away.

"Hey, get back here!" commanded the emperor, but he just waved as the group went into combat mode.

"Honorable? This is honorable combat?" Kefka asked, looking miffed. "I just counted again, and now I see nine fighters in your party. What even are those things?" He pointed to the spirits. "Wouldn't honorable combat be one at a time or something? And where did you pull that armor from? It wasn't here a second ago."

"First rule of war, overwhelm your opponent," Celes told them. "You taught me that, emperor. By example."

"And then you betrayed me," he lamented. "Terra I can see, she was never ours from the start. But you? After we gave you so much? Why?"

"Let's just say my eyes were opened. You could surrender, but I'm afraid no such option exists for you, Kefka."

"Why's that? Just because I can use magic? Don't want the competition? Oh, and I see you cowering back there, Cid. I'll take care of you first, don't you worry!"

"I'm just in the back row, I'm not cowering!"

"Keep telling yourself that."

"I think the better question is where they all came from in the first place," the emperor suggested.

"Hey, that's right. Our two questions for you are: Where did that come from, and where did you come from?" He paused. "And how did you know we were here? Among the questions I have for you are—"

"Never mind that, Kefka," the emperor cut him off. "Once we beat them it won't matter."

"True. If they ever actually start attacking instead of just standing there."

"We're actually waiting for you," Celes whispered to Lysanias. "Any time you want to go."

"Really? Huh, how about that?" *As there's nobody yet to pull out of armors I'll take the first shot, thank you very much.* He gestured with his free hand, and fire responded to his will. *I am going to miss doing this when I leave here.* He poured "energy" into the fire and a ball several meters across appeared, slamming into both men on the other side of the field.

"That's a good start," praised Cid, revving his chainsaw. He leapt for Kefka, buzzing him through with the thing.

"Ow!"

"Good!"

"Troops, to my side!" called the emperor, using his action to summon reinforcements.

"Can he do that?" Lysanias asked as three Magitek armors stomped into view on the battlefield.

"It's his special action," Cid explained. "It's legit."

"You're accusing *us* of cheating? That's rich," scoffed Kefka.

"But now you have five people on your side!"

"Tough!"

The wind spirit then went, zipping around and hitting the emperor.

"You're right, what is that thing?" he asked no one in particular.

Gogo, having nothing to mimic at the moment held his action.

Then the other two spirits went, Hawk attacking Kefka and the mountain spirit growing larger. They knew it took less damage that way, and thus so did Lysanias, so it didn't have many downsides.

Lysanias was up again, making him blink for a second and think *that can't be right* but then he remembered the sword. *It's increased my reflexes, possibly by a substantial amount. I have no idea how much '7' actually is, but I think I like it.*

So he yanked two of the three out of their armor systems with the cables, making them yelp and join the combat on the ground.

"Cheater! You're totally cheating!" Kefka accused. "You just went!"

"And I haven't even gone yet," complained Vargas.

"We have no quarrel with you," Celes told them. "You can run if you want."

They looked back at their boss, who glared at them as if daring them to do it, and then back at her. They shrugged.

"Suit yourselves."

Vargas was up, and he had the Ramuh Magicite, so he looked over at Gogo.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Any time. Do it, and nobody do anything else until I can."

He called upon its power. The form of Ramuh sprang into existence, zapping all the enemy combatants on the field.

"Maybe we will take you up on that offer," said the soldier on the right.

"Yeah, is it too late?" asked the one on the left.

"Sorry, it could be," Gogo told them, and the Esper came into existence again.

"How peculiar," it remarked, performing the same action. "See you again?" he asked, rather confused as he vanished for a second time.

"And what was that?" Kefka demanded. "You people are all over the place! What is going on here?"

"Like you don't know," Lysanias retorted.

"I really don't. Have I just cracked for good and this is just in my mind? What was that thing? Am I really being beaten up?"

*Wait, that really doesn't seem like an act. But of course the shadow avatar would be very good at trying to deceive by now. Right? Avatar or not, I guess we have to see this through.*

"Let's find out if you're wearing a wall ring, Cid!" Kefka cast fire 2, and it slammed into the man, making him grit his teeth.

"You idiot, that could have hit you!" the emperor reminded him.

"Eh, live a little."

"You mean almost die a little!"

"Should I use an area attack?" Terra called to the rest of them.

"I only have 30 HP!" complained the one soldier.

"I have 50!"

"Die for the empire!" Kefka commanded them.

"That's it, I know what I'm doing." She stepped up and some sort of spell energy hit everyone on the other side. Except for Kefka, who was wearing a wall ring apparently, so the spell energy that would have hit him was reflected back at her.

"Now I know I'm going crazy!" Kefka decided. "That mixed up girl just healed them!"

"What?" the group exclaimed.

"I had to," she called down. "But you better get out of here when you can! I won't show you mercy a second time!"

"We will!" they promised.

"This is all wrong," the emperor decided. "Maybe I've gone crazy from hanging around Kefka too much."

The mountain spirit was now up, and didn't want to undo all the work Terra had just done, so simply stomped over and yanked the remaining man out of the armor, setting them down on the ground.

He continued to act like he was in his mecha. "My controls aren't responding!" he called. "I think they did something to this armor!"

"That weird looking thing put you on the ground," called Kefka. "Honestly, try to keep up."

The man looked around, surprised. "Oh, that's right. What weird looking thing?"

"You can't see that thing? It's right there!"

The spirit waved.

"You're pointing at nothing!"

"We can't all be crazy!"

"I'll go defensive until those three get out of here," Celes decided. "Runic!" She held up her blade.

"You know, I really want to hurt you people," Kefka decided. "And I think I know the perfect way!" He swung some kind of mace but not at anyone in the heroes group, but against one of his own soldiers. They yelped in surprise and vanished.

"You monster!" Terra called. "You didn't need to do that!"

"I think I did. You don't want these others to die, surrender!"

"You know what, you're right, this is messed up," Vargas decided. "Because I never thought I would do this. I'm using a Phoenix Down!" The man shimmered back into existence, looking haunted.

"What just happened?" he called to the others.

"You got KOed by Kefka," the one next to him said. "That guy brought you back."

"No way!"

"Honest!"

The mountain spirit, not wanting to risk hitting the three men with a fireball used lightning bending and zapped Kefka, who coughed up smoke.

"Hold on," the emperor called. "What just hit you? I know your HP just went down, and something lifted that guy out of the armor, but what is it?"

"You really can't see it? But that's not even the big question. I want to know how it used magic when she," he pointed to Celes, "used her Runic ability. Did you find some way to bypass it?"

"It's just one mystery after another, isn't it?" she called to him sweetly.

Gogo pulled the chainsaw as well, dodging between the soldiers and hitting Kefka, followed by the wind spirit doing some damage as well. "As we can't use the... You know... Anymore."

"Whatever you think is best," Lysanias told him. "You don't need to justify it to me."

"This is getting old," Kefka decided.

"Look, you two are on your own," said soldier "2," running from the battle.

"Yeah, I'm out of here," agreed "1" also vanishing.

"You tried to kill me!" "3" said to Kefka. "If you think I'm fighting for you after that, you're crazy!" He three left the battle.

"Great, more traitors," Kefka grumbled. "Get some more troops in here, your highness."

"Er, I can't."

"What?"

"The armors are still here. That counts, they're still in the combat. Just because they don't have pilots doesn't mean anything. I can only summon in three at a time, and we still have three."

"Marvelous. That shouldn't even be possible, along with the rest of this messed up combat. Maybe I'm just dreaming this?"

The hawk spirit slashed at Kefka, who took more damage.

"For a dream losing HP sure hurts!"

The emperor was up, who looked over at the group, then at Kefka, and seemed to come to a decision. He drank a potion.

"Hey, I'm way lower in HP than you!" Kefka protested. "You could have passed it to me."

"I could have, but they seem more interested in beating you up. I think I'm going to let them."

"I don't believe this! You're throwing me to the wolves?"

"Something *is* going on here. Until I understand what, I don't think I should antagonize these people. They seem fully capable of killing us both today, but strangely hesitant to let a common soldier die. They should have mown down hundreds of them like it was nothing to get to where they are now, but yet they act as if they haven't. I want to know why."

"Because they're crazy, that's why! Now help me beat them!"

"No."

"Fool!"

"So we focus on Kefka?" asked Cid, chainsaw ready.

"I guess?" Celes answered. "At least for now."

"Okay."

He attacked as usual, then Vargas shouted "raging fist!" and unleashed a flurry of blows against Kefka.

Both the mountain spirit and Lysanias zapped him with lighting, and it was his turn again.

"Even if I took a potion, my HP is draining too fast," he complained. "What's your problem with me, anyway?"

"Uh, you enslaved me?" Terra reminded him.

"You wanted to poison a whole castle?" Celes added.

"I did poison a whole castle. That was the best day. But that still doesn't explain it."

"You're serious?"

"Yeah. Come on, there's the emperor right there! He's way worse than me. He ordered you taken from your home, Celes. I'll tell you about your sister if you let me live!"

"Maria? I know about her. Good try though."

"Come on, we could take them if you would help," he pleaded to the emperor.

"We've lost, Kefka. These people appeared out of nowhere, are doing things I've never considered possible, and I'm certain hid the Espers away somewhere. Without them we have no magic, and with no magic our dreams for the world are finished." He turned to the group. "We just wanted to give people a better life!"

"By taking over their towns and killing them?" Lysanias asked.

"If they resisted us, yes. Naturally we made every effort to simply ask them to join us peacefully. If they were neutral, like Narshe, we pledged to leave them alone. We would only occupy towns that mobilized troops to threaten us. We... did ask them, didn't we?"

"Whoops. I may not have worked as strenuously at that as I let on," Kefka admitted. "I just like watching stuff burn. The bigger the better. And towns are so big! You can't burn just one!"

"I don't believe this! A snake in my own ranks. No wonder the northern continent resisted us so much. I shouldn't have trusted one person to give me reports. I'm sorry."

"Very moving," Celes told him. "But I'm not convinced. Just don't get in our way, let us do what we came here to do, and we'll decide your fate later."

"Of course, of course."

"Fine. Maybe I can at least take Celes out and get a spell or two in before she's revived." He swung a mace of some kind at her, but she didn't look worried about it.

Terra used a beam from her magitek armor, Celes cast ice 2, and Vargas pummeled Kefka again, making it Lysanias' turn again.

"How much HP does he have?" he asked, wondering how he survived all that.

"He counts as a boss character right now, it's sort of complex," Cid told him.

"You don't even know that?" Kefka asked him. "What rock have you been living under?"

*Is he really going to maintain that he doesn't know me? Is this really some ploy of his? Or is this a mistake?*

Lysanias, the wind spirit, the mountain, Gogo, and Cid were all up before he could act again and Kefka only had 2400 HP left. It was Cid who dealt the killing blow, taking his last 220 HP and making him vanish from the combat.

"I surrender!" the emperor said immediately. "Let this combat be ended and we can talk."

The group shared a look, but they had done what they had come for.

“You’ll call off your troops? Stop trying to open the gateway to the Esper realm?” Celes asked.

“Yes, of course. I’ll even give you your old rank back, you can command the army yourself, make sure I’m keeping my promises.”

“We’ll see. Any objections?”

As there were none the combat faded, and the normal surroundings took hold again.

“Stand down!” he called. “None of these people are to be harmed!”

“Throw down your weapons,” Cid told him. “Your whole inventory, if you please.”

“Of course, right away.” A small pile of weapons took form in front of him, and wary of tricks the spirit grabbed them up and moved them away. If the emperor noticed he gave no sign.

“Get away from that door! Have the work stopped,” the emperor went on. “We’re pulling back. The forces beyond are too dangerous, believe me. You’re from beyond there, aren’t you?” he asked Lysanias. “That’s how you were able to do what you did. You’re not part of our world at all.”

*Oh great, is he the shadow avatar?* “Something like that,” he hedged.

“I see. What else can I do to show my sincerity? Of course I’ll pull my troops back from the northern continent once I return to Vector and can issue those orders. We’ll start rebuilding what Kefka destroyed as well.”

“Just slow down, chief,” Vargas told him. “Well? Is your mission here done or not?” he asked Lysanias. “You must have a way to tell.”

“I can. Just a second.” He got out the pouch and put his hand inside, wanting to see the marble that represented this world. It came to him and he pulled it out.

“It’s still dark,” he announced. “We didn’t get him. Either Kefka wasn’t it, or what we beat wasn’t him at all, but some kind of illusion or something.”

“I see where you’ve gone wrong,” Leo suddenly said, strutting up the group. “Lysanias, right? See, you thought the shadow avatar was Kefka. But it was me, Leo!”

Chapter 18  
Beating Up Leo  
When: After the revelation  
Where: Near the gate to the Esper realm

“Wait, what?” Celes asked, clearly out of sorts. “You’re claiming to be this shadow avatar?”

“That’s correct. Tada!” He spread his arms theatrically.

“No, that doesn’t make sense,” protested Lysanias. “Why would you choose this guy over Kefka? Are you... wasn’t he more powerful? But Kefka’s been the one trying to mess the world up, not you.”

“Exactly. You’re fairly new at this, Lysanias, so I’ll give you the low down. The down low? I can never remember that phrase. Anyway, I study a reality pretty extensively before I move into it. I mean come on, look before you leap, am I right? So I have a pretty good idea how things are in quotes supposed to go end quotes before I arrive. Who the opposition is, best candidates for who to take over, that sort of thing. There’s a specific set of circumstances that let me take someone over, so it has to be someone centrally placed, powerful, and accessible. Kefka would have been a good choice I admit, and there was an opportunity too, when he got magic. That would have qualified and I could have slipped into him. But I didn’t. Why?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m asking.”

“That’s easy. Kefka, in the original timeline, would have come pretty close to destroying the world all by himself. With me at his side, to give him a little push, he would have sewed this place up neatly. Enough for me to take the potential here with me, and that would have been that. It’s about energy savings. Why do all the work myself when someone is going to do 80% of it?”

“So you didn’t take him over because of laziness?”

“Well, I mean,” he glanced around. “If you put it like that it sounds bad. Anyway, I saw another person I could take over, this Leo fellow. When he compromised his morals and remained a soldier in an army he knew was corrupt, that was my opening. I made sure Kefka was as unbalanced as he could be thanks to some, uh, substances I know how to make from other worlds, and let him have his fun. But then you showed up, and changed the destiny of one. Little. Girl.” He pointed to Terra.

“Me?” she squeaked.

“That’s right. You were supposed to be rescued by someone in the Returners, and run around with them doing stuff. But you change the slightest thing and everything falls apart.”

“We never did find those people,” she admitted.

“Exactly. A Wanderer who had a mission found you, and suddenly everything changed for you. No side quests for him, no sir. He gathered allies, got stronger, and came straight for me. I mean Vargas? You weren’t supposed to play *any* part in this! One thing changes another, and so on, and so on. That’s the other reason I didn’t take Kefka over. I didn’t want too many changes that might result in that future I saw not happening. I knew a Wanderer would be here eventually, that would change things enough, and I like a sure thing. So I try to change as little as possible, if I can, is what I’m saying.” He shook his head. “Vargas was a minor player at best, beaten up by Sabin and never heard from again. Yeah, that’s right. Go back to sulking or whatever, you’re useless!”

“I am not!”

“Just keep telling yourself that, big guy. And dragging Cid into combat? Ugh.”

“What? Those tools of his are decent and he knows a lot of stuff.”

“What’s your point? Anyway, you managed to actually rescue the Espers rather than setting the alarms off, so Kefka didn’t find out about Magicite. So he didn’t get powerful enough to get through the gate himself after killing a bunch of Espers. They got held up trying to get through with conventional means, and then you made it here in time. So the world ending power will never get unleashed, and destroying this world has become ten times harder. I don’t even know if it’s worth it at this point.” He threw up his hands.

*So you're saying the world ending power is behind that door? Note to self- throw everything you can at that door to make sure it stays closed. Forever.*

"So leave, I won't think less of you."

"Ha! No, I'll still take my shot at killing you. Stupid wanderers, always messing up my plans. This will be the third time for you, right? I should have brought some candles, it's supposed to be our 'romantic' date."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't. So, emperor, I don't suppose you'd be willing to help me out? Maybe be a meat shield, absorb some attacks for me? These people have foiled your plans, maybe some revenge is in order? No?"

"You want to destroy the world you said! I live here! If anything I would join their party at this point!"

"Fine, that figures. Honestly. Hey, Gogo, you're not from around here. Miruku, right?"

"You can tell that?"

"Duh! Your reality is fairing pretty badly against my local avatar, Darkbolt, and I've got some Miruku working for me. They know a losing fight when they see one, and they make great agents for my side. You too can join me, and not have to go back to a universe in tatters. Whadoya say? Pals?" He held out a hand.

"I'll take my chances, thank you very much."

"Is that so?" His hand dropped. "Well, you can't say I didn't warn you. For the record, they don't call me the strongest fighter in the army for nothing. Let's do this!"

The battle began.

Lysanias, the mountain spirit, Vargas, and Gogo all went before Leo, so they slammed him with damage as they were able. On Leo's turn he looked the battlefield over and settled on the two spirits. "Let's reduce the number of things that are hitting me," he decided. "Begone!"

The spirits popped like soap bubbles.

"Oh, come on!" protested Lysanias. "That wasn't fair. Do you even have MP?"

"Don't need it. You don't. Just because I know stuff doesn't make it unfair, Lysanias."

"I beg to differ."

"If you're going to beg, get down on your knees. Won't help."

"If we could return to the combat?" Celes asked, knowing her turn was coming up in a moment. "He's regenerating, by the way."

"Great, draw it out as long as possible why don't you?" Lysanias asked him, slamming him with electricity again.

"That sword is making you far too fast," Leo complained.

"Almost doesn't seem fair, does it?" he countered.

"Haste!" cast Terra on herself.

"Haste!" cast Celes on herself.

The mountain spirit was up again, and more electric death went Leo's way.

"Let's see how this does," Leo mused, and attacked. Four times.

He hit the mountain spirit, Cid, Celes, and Lysanias, or at least tried to. The blow bounced off the mountain spirit, seriously hurt Cid who was still wounded from the last battle, caused Celes some concern, and while Lysanias tried to dodge he got cut right on the hand, the only exposed part of his arm.

*Wow, he is good. And what's with attacking four times like that?*

"Regen," cast Vargas on Cid.

"Thanks."

Terra used the cure beam built into the armor, bringing Cid back up to full HP again.

*I wonder. These guys can use items in combat, why can't I? He ran over and stuck an armor ward on Cid, just for good measure. I just hope it holds up like I do against the insane damage these people do. But my hand didn't go flying off, so I have to assume it will.*

"You guys think I'm totally feeble, don't you?" he asked.

"You were down to less than 200 HP," Celes told him. "You have the lowest levels and

HP of all of us.”

“I was just asking.”

Sticking the ward on was basically a close combat action so Lysanias was up again, so he stuck himself with one.

Cid used his favorite tool, the chainsaw, and scowled at Leo. “Is he not taking the full damage from stuff?”

“Give that man a prize,” Leo mocked him. “My Relics are rather special. I’m quite proud of them. They do a lot of things. But this is something I can do all on my own. Shock!” He whipped his sword around and a blazing scarlet column of energy that hit everybody. Luckily it wasn’t powerful enough to scratch the mountain spirit or the two wards. Unluckily it was enough to kill Celes, who fell over.

“Ah, one down,” he crowed. “That’s the way to do it!”

*Crap! And his sword only appears as he’s about to strike too. If he was just holding it I would metal bend it away from him. If it didn’t look like it was made of crystal, that is. But I would think of something. I’d love to copy that attack, but giving up my sight for the rest of this battle probably isn’t a good idea.*

“I’ll get her, but I’m pretty badly hurt,” Terra admitted. “Which is weird, given I’m riding in a Magitek armor.”

The mountain spirit went next, taking the ward Lysanias had gotten out and sticking it Terra as it passed.

“Wait, I’ll get Celes back up,” Vargas told everyone. “Gogo can use our magic, he can get us healed before Leo has a chance to go again.”

“That’s a good point,” Gogo agreed.

“Life!”

Celes staggered back up, looking around to see what she had missed.

“Sorry about that,” she apologized. “Did I miss anything?”

“Nah.”

*Is she apologizing for dying? What a bizarre place this is.* “Here,” Lysanias put an armor ward on her. “This seems to help.”

“Thanks. Should have had that on before the battle started.”

“I can’t think of everything!”

Mountain warded Vargas for his action, and Gogo cast cure on everyone.

“Why didn’t anyone learn cure 2?” he complained.

“Probably thought we wouldn’t have anything to worry about,” Celes mused. “Live and learn.”

Lysanias was up again, and stuck a final armor ward on Gogo, who nodded thanks.

“Mind if I have a turn now?” Leo asked.

“Oh, sorry, is our teamwork too much for you?” taunted Celes. “Yeah, such a pity you work alone.”

“I wonder how my sword will do against those wards? Should have brought some explosives or something, didn’t know I would be up against a progenitor.” He slashed four times again, hitting the mountain spirit, Terra, Lysanias, and the mountain spirit again. Only Terra took damage.

“Agh, that stupid mountain spirit!” he complained. “I can’t even scratch it with this sword, can I?”

“What’s the battle power?” Cid asked him.

“One sixty seven.”

“That’s decent. But I suppose it is made of rock. Could you cut a rock in half with it?”

“Probably not.”

“There you are then.”

*Are those two just having a conversation in the middle of a combat? I suppose the relaxed pace around here makes it possible. In that case...* “Why did you attack it at all?” he asked. “You must have known that from the last time.”

“Mind your own business!”

“It’s the Relic he’s using,” Celes guessed. “It lets you attack four times, yes, but in exchange who you attack is random, isn’t it?”

“What did I just say?”

“Uh huh.”

Terra cured the party again, she was at ¼ of her total HP, bringing everyone but herself back up to maximum. Lysanias of course still had the gash on his hand.

With little else defensively to do the mountain spirit started the attack again, hitting him with fire.

“Too bad you’re stuck at fire 1 levels with that,” he taunted, barely fazed. “You’ll never take me down that way.”

“How about this way?” Celes asked. “Bio!” A green cloud appeared around Leo, then rushed into him.

“Oh great, there goes my regeneration anyway, they’ll cancel each other out.”

“Exactly.”

“My turn,” Lysanias guessed, as the others looked to him. “Leo, you’re right. We’ve been holding back a bit, acting defensively, but I have to stop seeing you as a victim and start seeing you as the shadow avatar. There’s only one thing that can be done about you.”

“Holding back? I don’t think so. You’ve been spending all the energy you can on your electric attacks. Just wish I could ground you down with a Marowak.”

*Do what now?* “True. But back with Korra I knew Jinora threw three ‘blades’ of air at once to try and sever a cable holding her captive. I’ve been doing nothing the past month but fight stuff, so basically I figured out how she did that.”

“Three isn’t that much more than one.”

“It varies, actually. As usual with me, what I do seems random, and honestly I’m not that great an air bender. There were only so many to copy skill from, after all. But fire benders? I managed to see a few of them in my time there. So let’s see how you handle this.” He took a deep breath, taking a fire bender stance. From above him eight spears of fire came into existence, and he pantomimed throwing something at Leo. All eight slammed into him, making him wince.

“Nice!” cheered Celes. “That did over two thousand damage to him!”

“But how much of that is his total?”

“I have no idea. Someone cast scan on him.”

“You still have a long way to go,” Leo promised him.

“Scan,” Vargas cast.

“Oh, come on! You learned that?” he protested.

“It had a high learn rate, sue me. He’s down to 16,562 of 20,000. He’s not weak to anything.”

“Not even half?” protested Cid. “I need better tools.”

“That you do. Shock!” As the energy cleared he looked the battlefield over. “What? Your wards block too that? Wait, I should have done hundreds of damage to them.”

“Exactly. Luckily, things from my reality seem to work as though they were in my reality. Just like I still do. Just because my sword,” he hefted it, “has a 255 battle power, that doesn’t mean I can hit things with it and do a thousand damage like Celes could if she swung it. But on the other hand if I took the damage you all can do, the weakest enemy in the world would kill me in one blow. It’s all relative.”

“I was just complaining,” he clarified. “I am from a higher dimension than you, I know how realities work.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

Leo looked at him like “you stupid?”

“Cid, you’re not hasted!” Terra realized. “Haste!”

*Why are you in that armor if you’re just going to do regular magic?*

“Ah, thanks. Think I’ll use my-”

“Chainsaw, yes, we know Cid,” Leo deadpanned. “Knock yourself out, get your use out of it.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

“Actually, you aren’t hasted either,” Celes realized. “We know it works on you. Haste!”

“Thanks,” Gogo said.

Mountain was up, and repeated the trick with the fire. It only got six spears, but they

were still just as effective. (Which is to say they did a random amount of damage from 150 to 300)

Leo used shock again, causing the edges of the wards to fray some more, Lysanias' worst of all.

*Of course I would get the one I did worst on. Figures.*

"Ice 2," cast Vargas, just to see what that would do to the man. It did damage, rather predictably.

Lysanias was up and did over a thousand damage to him, followed by the mountain who made almost as good a showing this time. Seeing how well this working Gogo did the same, making a better showing probably because he had a better endurance.

"That's more like it," Cid encouraged them, chainsawing him again.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but this continued. Leo was now at only *half* his HP, and probably had a few potions in his inventory for when things started to go badly for him. But he only had the two moves, and his HP was falling fairly rapidly. In the end it was the mountain spirit that dealt the final blow, and Leo vanished from the combat, dumping them back out into "normal" space.

They were surrounded by Magitek armors.

"Don't do anything stupid!" Vargas warned him. "You know we can fight."

"My good man, these were just in case you *lost*. I knew the only chance I would have is if I attacked him after being weakened by you. As you've won I'll order my forces back to Vector." He turned. "That's right, pack up. Head back to Vector."

"Who's in charge?" one man asked. "With Leo dead there's no general in the field. Who will coordinate us and give orders?"

The emperor looked over at Celes. "Well?"

"I better, just to make sure you don't try anything. All right," she called. "Get those tents packed up. Remove those supports from the bridge, we'll be knocking it over anyway on the way out. Move people!"

*Yup, she's a general.*

"So is it over?" Terra asked, climbing down from the armor.

"Let's take a look." Lysanias got out the marble again, which was now shining. "Seems to be the case. You did it, everyone. Your world is safe."

"From one threat," Cid reminded them, looking over at the emperor who was beating a hasty retreat. "What about the other?"

"You'll have to watch him carefully," Lysanias agreed. "But that's your problem."

"Are you leaving right away?" Terra asked sadly.

"Actually, no. We still have to seal that gate up better. I want to make sure there are no better items to take with me out of here, and do some training. With all the running around we've been doing I haven't really done any since I got here. I can't just beat creatures up and get XP like you all can."

"Oh!" She perked up. "I'm glad to hear that!"

Later that afternoon the gate had been *very* well sealed, by everything Lysanias could throw at it, and the bridge was torn down to boot. To talk things over and decide his next move the image of Inari hung before them.

"It is okay if I stay a bit and train, right?" Lysanias asked her.

"Of course. Your next reality will be there, of course you can't wait a hundred years or anything..."

"No, nothing like that. It's just I can train energy intensive things here pretty much without limit. I would be a fool to waste the opportunity."

"True. There aren't many realities like that one."

"I don't need to train, and I'm anxious to head home, if that's okay with you?" Gogo asked.

"Of course. Lysanias can give you the white marble. Come here and I'll get you squared away."

"Thanks. And you too, it was nice having so many powers at my disposal. Maybe we'll meet again someday. Heck, get more powerful and come beat up this Darkbolt for me back home!"

They laughed. "Maybe I will, at that. While I have you here..." He pulled the sword out and showed it to Inari. "I can take this with me, right?"

"Ah, you did manage to make it, good. Even I can't be sure of every event that will happen when I send you someplace. Yes, that sword was destined for your hand. In fact it'll play a bigger role than you realize, given the abilities it has. And once you're back, I'll have a little mission for you that involves your old sword. But we can talk about that."

"My old one? Okay, if you say so."

"I do say so. Basically, you'll need to spend some time with that one, away from that world. Your next one should give you the time to synchronize with it a bit. After that I'll send you someplace you can learn to really unlock its power."

"Should I do anything special?"

"Nope, just use it. And believe me, they're sort of big on a particular type of sword there, so you'll probably get plenty of opportunity."

"You said the next place I go I'll need to find someone?" he remembered.

"Yes, a woman named Jenny. You've soaked up enough extra dimensional energy to start learning the special skills that all reality travelers have access to. And by start learning I mean absorb with your eyes."

"I figured that."

"Good. Anything else?"

"I guess not. I'll send Gogo along."

"With love, from me, to you! See you!" Her image vanished.

*Yeah, I guess.*

So Lysanias toured the world with his friends, training and raising their levels in case the emperor got out of hand. He seemed as good as his word once he learned the whole story about what his world had narrowly avoided. He also reluctantly admitted they had a better plan.

"And you think you can trust just handing out the Magicite to everybody?" Lysanias asked, when he heard their plan himself.

"Great thing about this stuff is," Celes explained, "it's a finite resource. You get the MP initially, and then you can learn a couple of spells from a single one. Then it becomes useless. To keep learning spells you have to get a new Magicite. And to get a new Magicite you have to give back the old one. You lose it or sell it or whatever, and that's it for you."

"I see."

"And once everyone gets MP," Terra said, "things really get interesting. We know magic can do things like make food and water, we ate enough of your stuff on the road. So why can't our magic do that too? We can start researching what magic can do for us, and not rely on the Magicite anymore."

"Right. We can teach each other the spells we know, and maybe Thamasa's people can come out of the shadows and teach us too."

"It's going to take some time though, given how few you actually have," he cautioned.

"More may be found in the world," Celes brushed that off. "And yeah, no one said it would be easy. But this time we can do it right. And maybe one day open that gate and have the Espers back as friends and equals instead of a resource to be exploited."

"And who knows what my dual nature really means," Terra put in. "Will I pass my ability to change onto my kids? I'm sort of dying to know!"

"I wish you luck with that," he told her honestly.

He visited Relm again, told the town the story and they said they would stand ready when people with magic started visiting them for their wisdom. Lysanias visited the smith as well, telling him the story of the battles he had been in, and finally it came time to say

goodbye to another group of friends. Naturally they had found the Returners by this time, all of whom were rather astonished a group as small as theirs had managed so much. They were lurking about in the background, not really a part of this. As promised he worked with Terra and the others to see if they could communicate with the Magicite, and some promising results were had in at least getting certain feelings from them. He felt with more work it might be possible, and encouraged them to keep trying. Finally he explained how he made magical items and Terra, Celes, and Cid both made notes on the process. They could make them here, Relics existed after all. He figured maybe that would help restart the practice. Finally he grabbed some of those books back at the hideout, the Returners said he was welcome to anything there, and he bought a bunch of potions both to see if they might work outside this world, and to study himself. *If I can bring back new alchemical formulas for my "employer" the mages guild, Rick and the others will really flip over them!*

But finally it was time to go. They were back in the cave the Returners used as a hideout, a fitting place to depart from.

"Goodbye, my friends," Lysanias said, shield hand curled around the marble that looked gray and imposing. It had one divot out of it, and felt very cold to the touch.

"Thanks for coming to my rescue," Terra told him with a hug. "Even if I did fall on top of you."

"It worked out for the best, didn't it?"

"Sure did."

"And you're taking the sword?" Celes asked.

"I'm taking the sword. Go get your own!" They laughed.

"I know. Good luck out there. With all your powers, don't forget it's the friends you make that are your greatest asset."

"Granddaughter, that was very beautiful!" Cid told her.

"I think you should just call me Celes, for now," she told him.

"Oh. Yes, that's probably best. I'm... yes."

"Don't worry, she might forgive you. In ten years or so. Anyway, I have a gift for you." He handed the man a ward.

"What's in here?"

"I figured I took enough of your magitek, I would give something back. This is from the last world I was on. It's similar to your tech, but it runs without magic. Some kind of liquid fuel is stored in a canister on the back. Figuring out how to duplicate it should keep you busy awhile."

"Thank you. I just tear it, right?"

"In a large, open space. That's right."

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say anything. Use it to improve everyone's life, not just in the empire." He stuck a hand out, and the man grasped it.

"Deal."

"You never did learn my techniques," Vargas told him.

"I know. I figure with my bending I have enough ways to cause damage. I think your way would really sap me, once I'm back in a place energy matters. But I've been watching you, I could probably duplicate it if I needed to, later."

"I see. Your martial arts is already top notch, so you're probably right. Go with honor."

"I think you got yours back, a little. For what it's worth. But the world is still balanced on a knife's edge, it'll need strong people to help keep in on course."

"I will. You have my word. I actually have something for you..."

"Oh?"

"We all do," Terra told him. "Just a little something to remember us by."

"This is my gift," Vargas told him, handing over a box from his inventory. Inside were two claws, the weapon favored by martial artists in this world. Lysanias still had his shield strapped on, but he slipped one on and looked it over. The claws were long and sharp, he had no doubt they had a good "attack power."

"Thanks. I could almost scale a mountain with these things strapped on."

"You could. They have a one in four chance of poisoning the person you hit with them, so be careful not to scratch yourself."

"Noted." He put it back in the box and set it inside a ward, which he put back in the dispenser for now.

"Here's mine," Celes said, stepping up. She handed him a warm jacket, red, which seemed familiar.

"Isn't that the jacket we picked up in Gogo's cave?"

"Yes." She looked uncomfortable and seemed to be having trouble handing it over.

"It raises stats, doesn't it?"

"Maybe!" He raised an eyebrow. "Okay, it does. I figure there may be times you can't wear your armor, like because it's snowing or whatever. This way you'll still get at least some enhancement. And you'll be immune to fire when you wear it too, so that's a plus."

"This must be a big sacrifice for you. Thanks."

"Yeah, well, don't go spreading it around." She handed it over and Terra stepped up after he put that one away as well. *Have to sort them out later, wish I had an inventory I could just stick things into. Ah well, maybe in the next world.* "I'll just make a better one, someday."

"You do that."

"Do you really want to keep this?" she asked, taking the hairpin out of his hair.

"Hey, ten percent chance of hitting first? That could save me one day. Did you want it back, Cid? I'm sorry, I should have actually asked! I sort of forgot I was wearing it!"

"It's fine, keep it."

"Thanks."

"For now, try this on." She held up a bracer that had a dragon curled around it, and after slipping the hairpin into his pocket he slipped it on. It was adjustable, and the arms of his armor were narrow enough it fit. It looked a bit out of place, but there was nothing he could do about that at this point. "This should increase your strength by fifty percent. Whatever that means for you. But as it's not a specific number I figure it should at least help a little. I don't know if that means just your own or after being augmented by our stuff. But on worlds with no magic you won't have to wear the wall ring, you can wear the hairpin and the bracelet."

"Good idea. This is all too much you guys, thanks."

"You earned it," Celes told him.

"Yeah, now don't forget us, okay?" Terra told him, turning away from him. "Now get out of here! Go save another world."

"Goodbye, everyone," he said sadly. "I will remember you all fondly." *But now I have to run. Run to the next world, as my purpose demands.*

"Goodbye!" all but Terra shouted, waving. He smiled somewhat sadly, and vanished.