

Susan lands in Terra

Time: Just as she hits the water

Place: Underwater, the Forgotten City

Susan hit the water with the girl she had saved, and found it icy cold. The girl struggled in her arms, but with her STRENGTH augmented by magic, she didn't stand a chance of breaking free. Susan saw she was starting to panic and bubbles were flowing from her mouth and nose as they went deeper.

I've got just the solution for that!

Susan cast a non-verbal *Breathe Water* taking the extra .2 seconds, because why not? The spell went off, and Susan called to her. "Calm down! You can breathe underwater now, you won't drown. You're okay."

Slowly the girl stopped thrashing about, and blinked at Susan, realizing she was right. She looked around, interested.

"Who are you?" she asked rather petulantly. "Do you know what you've done?"

"Susan Felton, at your service. And as to what I've done, I think it's called saving your life. So, you're welcome for that."

"I have to get out of here, he's up there!" She tried to pull away.

"Uh, no, I just saved you from that guy, and he doesn't look happy about it." They both looked up, and through the crystal clear water they could see the face of the man who tried to stab the girl in the back scowling down at them. "In fact, let's get a little deeper before he gets any ideas about coming down here after you."

"No, no!" But the girl's struggles were useless, and Susan pulled her deeper underwater. They both came to rest under the pillar, where by now it seemed some kind of combat was taking place above them. Susan could see flashes of magic and some kind of large creature battling it out where they had been, and Susan wondered where the heck that thing had come from. With no air in their lungs, they didn't float much, and Susan released the girl's hand when it was clear she wasn't going to try bolting for the surface again.

Maybe that guy can shape-shift? But why go from wielding that huge sword to being a tentacle monster? Of course, maybe that's how people fight here, I can't take anything for granted. But her companions still seem human, so maybe it's only bad guys?

"You want to tell me what's going on?" demanded the girl. "You just doomed this entire planet, you know."

"What? No I didn't. Look, the people that sent me here were falling all over themselves to save your life. What were his exact words? Something about you being the last of your kind, and how your death would be a pointless tragedy, and how you had a lot to teach people here. Something like that."

"I am the last Cetra, that's the whole point. That's why I had to do it!"

"Do what?"

"Summon Holy, of course!"

"Hard to summon anything when you're dead. Can't you just finish that ritual or whatever when they're done killing that thing up there?"

The girl shook her head emphatically. "You don't understand. Holy requires a *sacrifice*. Don't you see? That's why I left them, because I knew Sephiroth would come and kill me. I have to carry the wish for Holy to appear into the Lifestream if I want it to work. I knew he would come and make that happen, thus sealing his own doom!"

Using your own soul for a spell? That's got to be the worst Enhancer ever!

"Look! The white Materia doesn't shine any more!" She pulled the marble like orb from her bow and thrust it out to Susan.

"Okay, now I know what other people feel like when I talk about Paragon stuff. You want to go where? And I take it that's a Materia thing?"

"You don't know what Materia is? Where've you been all your life? How did you even get here?" She was seeming more and more exasperated.

"Look, I think we both are going to have a lot of questions to ask the other. I know you

don't know me, but look around. Where are you right now? Could your magic do that?"

"Well, no," she admitted.

"Okay. This is the very least I am capable of. Please put a little trust in me and the beings that sent me here. Don't ask me how, but I can feel you have a very pure and strong energy. Losing that would be a waste, especially when there's another answer. That guy you're obviously fighting, he's not what you think. Let me help you deal with him, as I have twice before. Don't take the cowards way out and wish for death, even if you think it can solve your problem. Living to fight another day, that will solve your problem. Okay?"

She shook her head again, but sadly. "You can't understand. But okay, I'll try and put a little faith in you. Look, I'm Aerith... and thank you, for saving my life."

Susan broke into a wide grin. "Now we're getting somewhere! I'm Susan, nice to meet you!"

They shook hands and sort of looked away from each other, a little embarrassed.

"So, uh, do you do this often? Save young girls and pull them underwater with you to have your way with them?"

"Whenever possible," Susan said seriously. "But that last second rescue was actually a first for me. Did I look cool busting out of nowhere like that or what?"

"You certainly surprised me. And Sephiroth, by the look on his face that I caught on the way down. Have you been following us this entire time, or something? Why show yourself now?"

"No, nothing like that. I saw you only a few seconds before I rushed through and saved you. So I have no idea what's going on here, like you said. As to where I came from, that's a little bit complicated. Better to explain that when we're not both shivering and frozen underwater."

"Very well." Aerith looked around. "I guess this place would have been my tomb, huh? Strange, to experience it like this while I'm still alive. I am still alive, aren't I? I haven't been turned into some kind of ghost and you're trying to trick me?" Susan leaned over and pinched her. "OW!"

"Would a ghost feel pain?"

"I don't know, I've never been one before, have I?" She grinned suddenly. "I guess not, it was kind of silly, wasn't it?"

"Not at all. In fact, exploring the possibilities is a sign of a good mind, and you asked for evidence of your predicament. Seems reasonable to me."

"Thanks, I guess? Look, I think they're done fighting, can we please get out of this water now?"

"Sure thing. Look, it seems lower over there, we can climb out. That dress of yours wasn't built for swimming in, and neither were those boots. We can just sort of walk over there and not worry about you trying to swim that distance."

"We can give it a try."

So Susan helped Aerith, both holding onto each other as they half swam, half walked around the bottom of the pillars, and Susan helped her float upwards. Once they broke the surface and got the water out of their lungs, the spell broke and by that time, her friends had come over to help them out. Susan looked them over. The largest was the man with dark skin, and the apparent machine gun grafted into his arm. *Okay, so they have cyborgs here?* The spiky haired one looked the most worried, and still had one hand on his enormous sword as if expecting another attack. His other hand he offered to Susan to help her climb out of the water.

Next to him was a good looking girl in a t-shirt a couple of sizes too small, which showed off her assets just as the black mini-skirt showed off her legs. Sitting and watching with interest was a four legged beast, with a tattoo of a XIII on one leg and a tail tip that was *on fire*. The oddest of the group was the pure white, short, wide, tusked, purple winged thing that had a cat with a cape and a crown sitting on its head.

Oh yeah, there's a story there all right.

Rounding out the group were one more man and one more woman, the man was holding a lance and smoking a cigarette, looking bored. He looked the oldest, while the other girl looked the youngest, and was bouncing on the balls of her feet like she couldn't keep still.

She had a huge throwing star in one hand, and a weird guard or something over one arm.

Susan gave a start as she registered movement nearby, and a creepy looking guy stepped out of the shadows. He was wearing a long red cape, carrying a gun, and his scraggly black hair looked like he had slept in for about five years and never bothered to comb it when he woke up.

Quite the assortment.

Suddenly Susan found herself being hugged by the spiky haired guy, and she wondered how he had moved so fast. "I don't know who you are," he said, relief in his voice, "but thank you. Thank you for saving Aerith when I couldn't."

"Happy to help," replied Susan.

"And you!" The man whirled on Aerith. "Why in the name of the Black Materia did you run off like that? You must have known he would immediately come after you!"

"Yes, I've gotten that speech from her just recently, I don't need to hear it again, Cloud." She took off her jacket and rung it out. "I'm wet, freezing, and a little bit angry right now. I thought five minutes ago that I would be dead, but now I'm not. I was trying to save you all. If that meant giving up my life so that Sephiroth believed he had won when in reality my death would have cost him everything, it was a small price to pay."

"You wanted to die!" Cloud sounded like he couldn't believe his ears. Aerith just stared him down and started struggling with her jacket to put it back on.

"So you are not against us?" asked the red caped guy, "casually" inspecting his gun but promising violence with his eyes.

"No, I was sent here to help you, and that's what I'll do, if you'll have me," Susan replied. "Has anyone seen a black cat around here?"

"Present!" said the cat atop the white thing.

"Uh, I meant the one I came with."

"Over here," said Sparkle, leaping down across the oddly spaced stone cylinders that led up to the area they had arrived at. "They seemed rather busy with that odd creature so I thought I would stay out of the way."

"Great, another one," remarked the black guy. "You going to spy on us as well, cat?"

"Spy on you? Why would I do that?"

"Don't know. We already had one spy, I'd rather not have another."

"Don't worry."

"If you say you are friends, then until such time I learn otherwise I will treat you as such." His gun vanished, and he held out a hand. "I am Vincent, formally of the Turks. May I have the honor of your name?"

That was a neat little trick with the gun. No apparent effort, no magical spell cast, no trigger word. How did he do that?

"Susan Felton, and this is Sparkle, my friend and companion. I'm pleased to meet you all."

"Introductions can wait," said Cloud, finally putting his own sword down, and then it too vanished. "Aerith is right. We need to get these two dried off and warm. If Susan is going to travel with us she's going to need to know what we're fighting for, and why. Plus I want to hear what Aerith has to say. It's the middle of the night and we're all still exhausted, especially after taking down another piece of Jenova. Let's head back to the shell upstairs, trade stories, and get some more sleep."

Susan looked at her watch, and yes, it seemed it was only about 2:00 AM here. Strange, the place seemed pretty lit up. In fact, as she finally had the chance to really look around, she did. "Wow," she breathed. "This place is really pretty!" Soft light filtered down from high above, and the scant buildings here were rounded and smoothed, almost seemingly carved from single pieces of stone rather than built. Across the way stood a bell in a high tower, and high overhead, some kind of crystalline substance arched up hundreds of meters. Also rising up from somewhere nearby was a crystalline staircase, hanging in the air without apparent support. The place radiated peace and serenity, and to both her *Magic Sense* and her new *Spirit Sense* this place was alive with power.

I guess it's no wonder Aerith came here to try activating some big magic. This place seems custom made for such a thing.

"Hi, I'm Yuffie!" said the young girl, bouncing over to her as the others made their way to the staircase. "That was a neat trick you did, appearing out of nowhere like that. Can you teach it to me? I'm a ninja myself and I've never seen anything like that. Nice sword too."

"Thanks, made it myself."

"Seriously? How many Materia slots does it have?"

How many what?

But Susan was spared answering that question as the black guy turned back. "Knock it off, Yuffie. You'll have to forgive her, she's a little obsessed with the stuff."

"It's okay. I'm sure I would be too, in her place."

"Oh, you know about Wutai? Wait, how did you know I came from there? Oh, right, being a ninja, duh! Do you have any good Materia?"

"Yuffie!"

"Okay, okay. Geese, he's so uptight."

"No, I just haven't forgotten that you stole all our Materia just recently. I'm keeping my eye on you so you don't try stealing something from her."

"That was, like, days ago. You're not over that yet? I gave it all back, didn't I?"

"After we chased you down and rescued you from the Don. As far as getting it all back? I'm still not sure. I thought we had three fire but now there's only two."

"You probably just misplaced it. Don't blame me for every little thing that goes missing. Anyway, it was three ice that we had, and about a zillion lightnings, thanks Vincent."

"I only have seven at present, please don't exaggerate."

"And they say I'm obsessed. Who in their right mind uses seven lighting Materia at the same time, am I right?"

Susan was unsure how to answer this rather odd question. "You said you were a ninja? Does that mean you actually know ninjutsu?"

"I sure do!"

"Excellent. Could you teach some to me?"

Yuffie missed a step and had to be steadied before she fell. *Wait, is she really a ninja? Or does she just have Clumsy?* "You really want to learn from *me*? I mean, of course, who wouldn't want to learn from the number one Wutai ninja? I just cleaned the pagada you know!"

"I didn't know that!" *What does that even mean?* "Why shouldn't I? If there's a real, live, ninjutsu master in front of me I would be a fool not to take some lessons. My fighting skills can always use some more polish, and I've heard good things about the style."

"Well, *someone* finally appreciates me! You guys could take some lessons."

The black guy grumbled something Susan didn't catch.

"Man, I'm glad you're joining us. Not that I don't mind a bunch of men running around, but this team needs more girls. With Aerith gone, hey Aerith, I'm glad you're not dead!" she shouted.

"Thanks!" Aerith shouted back, panting from climbing the steps.

"Anyway, with her gone it was just me and miss boobs over there."

"I heard that!"

"You are joining us, right?"

"That's the plan. It's the reason I came here."

"Great. Looking forward to see what you can do!"

They topped the rise and came out in a weird circular room, set with funny glowing lights and made out of something Susan couldn't identify. As she was led out, she saw the structure looked like a giant shell, and it had a small pond in front of it.

"What an odd structure!" she remarked.

"Yeah, now that we know how to get past the Sleeping Forest, I'm sure those archeologists out there will be having a field day in here soon. I bet we'll learn a lot about the Ancients by studying this place," said the older guy.

Man, I should start making a list. Ancients. Cetra. Materia. Slots. Sephiroth.

They passed through a short area full of what looked like petrified remains of various plants, and stepped out into a wide open area with a path that led to a T going left and right.

Susan closed her eyes as she felt the power of this place, and made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting an eight. It was enough to tell there was spiritual power here, but not pinpoint any kind of source for the stuff. She took a deep breath, ignoring her frozen clothes for a moment.

"This place is just saturated with *Spirit Energy*, isn't it? You feel that, Sparkle?" She only got a seven, but agreed.

Aerith spun to face them. "Wait, you can tell that? Are *you* Cetra somehow?"

The others looked at her, awed.

"What? No, I just happen to have recently picked up a technique that allows me to sense energy in people, places, and things. That's all."

Aerith didn't seem convinced, but with the chill night air blowing around her, she didn't want to argue.

"We were staying in a shell over to the left. Follow me. Oh, and don't worry, there's no random encounters around here."

No what? Add that to the list.

Susan accepted that with a shrug, and they made their way to an odd looking dwelling that really did look like a shell. Inside, more of those odd lights were strung from the walls, and it seemed much warmer in here. Either the shell trapped heat from the day or the lights gave off heat. It was hard to say, but the lights did seem a bit warm.

Cloud looked around. "All right, stay here. I'll go check the nearby houses for some supplies. Aerith, you think if I hung a curtain right here, you two could get out of those clothes and hang them up to dry? Then we could at least hear each other and trade stories."

"Sounds like a good idea, Cloud," she said, sounding rather surprised. "I have to say, I'm a little shocked you suggested it. If my leaving has made you more sensitive, maybe I should do it more often."

"Please don't even joke about that, Aerith. I won't be more than a few minutes. Barret, Vincent, want to help me carry stuff?"

"Yeah, whatever," said the black guy.

"Have my sins reduced me to a pack mule?" mused the red caped guy, but he went too.

Yuffie looked the two over after they had left. "You know, we could dry you off with some fire magic. Fire 1 wouldn't hurt you too much, and we could heal you afterwards. It would totally work!"

"Yuffie! Please do not suggest setting the person that saved me on fire!"

"But it would work I'm telling you. Right? Don't you think?"

"I think I'll just do it the slow way," replied Susan. "As fun as being hit with fire sounds... I'll pass for now."

"Spoilsport. It would work."

Susan hadn't recommended any of her own magic, wanting to see what these people did. Now having a chance, she did a *Magic Sense* on them, and get some weird results. It was like they were carrying around a bunch of magical effects on their person, but they weren't magical in the least. *So is this world like my father's, with both magic and technology? I mean my world couldn't do that cyber arm! And I think Cloud's eyes have been augmented, because they were actually glowing. But if they do have magic, why not use it? Why suggest the radical step of hitting us with a fire attack just to dry us out? I'm going to need more information. And wouldn't it burn our clothes off rather than just drying us out?*

With the men back and with a heavy piece of... something... strung across the room, the two girls disrobed and hung their wet clothes up to dry. Yuffie looked them over, shrugged, and started stripping herself.

"What are you doing?" asked the lady with the tight shirt.

"It's uncomfortable for people if they're naked, to be around people who are clothed. And vice-versa. You should take your clothes off too, otherwise it'll just be awkward for everyone. Then we'll all be the same and there'll be no problems! Oh, did you two get introduced? That's Tifa."

"Is that short for anything? Tiffania maybe?"

Tifa shook her head. "Nope, just Tifa. Why?"

"Oh, you just remind me of someone I knew named Tiffania. Nice to meet you."

“Yeah, you too. Sorry I’m not all with it right now, I’m just exhausted.”

“No problem. If you all want to get my story in the morning, that’s fine.”

“Maybe we better,” said someone from the other side. “I’m pretty beat myself.”

“Sure, if you all think that’s best. I guess I’ll say goodnight, then.” *I think that was*

Cloud.

Everyone said goodnight, and curled up on the bedding that Cloud and the others had brought. Susan stared at their prone forms, as most of them went to sleep almost immediately.

Go to sleep? Are you nuts? I haven’t even had lunch today. It’s like eleven in the afternoon for me! This sucks.

Doing some Homework

Time: Late that night

Place: The shell house, outside the Forgotten City.

Susan was not idle while the others slept. She popped her book out of the *sub-space pocket* and paged through it, looking for the new spells and things that Silverstreak had given her. She found greater detail about the skills of 0 she now had, in case she wanted to put some XP into them. The skills she now had access to as a *Spirit Mage* were:

Aura Reading- with practice, she could actually “see” the energy that surrounded all living things. This could reveal their emotional state, general health level, and if the person was basically good or evil.

Resisting- Apparently requiring a five rating in *Spirit Manipulation*, this skill could help resist mental assaults, possession, or anything else that might cause her to act against her wishes.

Oh, that one is getting some points. If The Darkness really is influencing me, that skill could really help! Did he know? He must have, he said the scan showed him I carried a piece of The Darkness inside me, didn't he? But why do I need practice in manipulating my inner energies? This is strictly a mental thing. Oh well.

Spirit Aura- This one required a ten in *Spirit Manipulation*, something Susan wouldn't have very soon. Keeping it active was a -2 to everything, and honestly, *Avatar of War* was better in every way. It would let her spend even more energy, and active it would serve as a minor armor. *I suppose I would kinda cool all lit up with energy? Passed on for a while.*

Spirit Shape- What was with all these skills requiring ten in *Spirit Manipulation*? It seemed interesting, acting as more the *Animagus* skill from her homeland than anything else. With it, you could turn into a normal animal, or even a child version of yourself. But that animal couldn't be changed, and you were for all intents that animal. So if someone was looking for you, they would have to look for the animal form. And things like *Magic Sense* and *Spirit Sense* didn't register you. And you couldn't use magic or other skills that normal animal didn't have. Tough to learn, and *Shape-shift* was more versatile overall. *I'll think about it, someday maybe.*

Spirit Step- Now this one was interesting. She could do the exact same thing with magic, just as King Joseph had in the last world. But this wasn't magical, just a *Spirit Energy* thing. Her speed needed to be a ten, but that was easy with *Acceleration* going. Imagine having the better dodge, but also being able to vanish and reappear without needing to cast a spell! She could, with *Spirit Step*! Oh look, it too needed a ten in *Spirit Manipulation*. *Sigh.*

Spirit Sense- She already had some sense of what this could do. Let her sense energy that was around her, or inside people. Basically she could tell if they had more (she hoped not) or less energy than she did. It could do a lot, from keeping track of people in the dark to telling if a person had a particular power going. She felt she would probably get a lot of use out of that one.

Spirit Manipulation- Ah, the granddaddy of them all. In simple terms, it let her spend an additional amount of energy equal to her skill rating. Or she could make a check before spending energy, and put that amount into her next action! But even better than that, if she found an external source of energy with *Spirit Sense*, she could actually hook into it and get some free energy out of it.

Well, I'll probably work on getting Manipulation up to a ten in any case. Imagine spending twenty energy on a spell without having Energetic Accumulation going. It's not

always feasible to have it up, and it does take an action to gather any extra. This would just let me spend more, all the time. Wait, could I use Augment Skill to make this better?

She had to stop that line of thought for the moment, her giggling was threatening to wake the others, and she didn't want that.

She also put on *Augment Skill* and got out her magical book of *Research*, centered around the physical law of this reality. She didn't want to look like a total idiot when they started explaining things, after all. She made some notes, and it seemed *Materia* and *Lifestream* went together. *Lifestream* was an almost liquid manifestation of the *Spirit Energy* she now was able to feel that ran in "streams" under the crust of the planet. Apparently when things died their energy returned to this stream and it was drawn from when new things were born.

Wow, how has knowing, with certainty, what happens after you die changed these people's attitudes about death? Has it at all? Has it made them respect nature more? Live in harmony with the land? I can't wait to find out. And if it's liquid-like, what would happen to you if you drank it? A literal water of life. Crazy!

Now *Materia* came from this *Lifestream* when cracks in the Earth allowed it to reach the surface. If left alone, it could crystalize and become solid. This would allow anyone that stumbled across it to pick it up and utilize it. Somehow that's where their magic came from, in some odd process she hadn't managed to figure out yet. Apparently it could also grow in power and fission off, creating a copy of itself.

That figures, it is made of life energy, after all. And life wants to reproduce itself and grow. Huh, an object that gets XP, what will the multiverse think of next?

It was specially designed weapons and armor, with *Materia Slots* that allowed a person to use *Materia* best. This explained Yuffie's earlier question about her sword. These slots could be independent or linked, depending on the quality of the craftsmanship. Linked ones could work together in certain ways, with different colors of *Materia* working differently. Green ones was direct attack magic, while Yellow allowed you to do certain things like... steal?

Wait, these people need a chuck of rock to let them swipe something off another person? That doesn't make a lot of sense.

So she got a background on the world and sat watching the others sleep, which was boring. She made herself some food and had lunch, then decided to put herself to sleep with the *Somnolent Smog*. After all, these people were already asleep, they wouldn't notice. And she could begin attuning herself to their day/night cycle rather than having lunch at 3:00 AM the rest of her stay here.

Good thing I don't have the Poor Traveler weakness. That would be a total killer in a situation like this, where I was always traveling!

Susan cast the spell, allowed herself to fail the check to resist, and next woke up with someone's arms around her. She opened her eyes and found Yuffie staring at her.

"Morning," she said, somehow already chipper and sounding full of energy.

"Ah, good morning," said Susan, unsure how to respond.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind!" said Yuffie, not moving so Susan wasn't sure it would matter one way or the other. "It's just I woke up last night and you seemed, I don't know, so lonely somehow. I think you were saying something about the moon? I just couldn't help myself."

"It's okay. Look, I think I should start asking this directly, that way I can save myself embarrassment later. Do you like... girls?"

Yuffie thought for a moment. "Never gave it much thought, I guess. First I was real busy with my ninja training, and my master wouldn't have any of that relationship stuff getting in the way. After that I left and started traveling around looking for *Materia*. Not long after that, I ran into these guys and tried to take their *Materia*. Oh, they totally forgave me, don't you worry. I haven't really had a lot of time to consider the question."

"Oh. Well, you might want to start if you make a habit of getting into people's beds. They might misunderstand, and you know that awkwardness you talked about earlier? That

would be a million times worse, believe me.”

“I guess. Or it could be a fun experience, and no harm done! It’s all in how you look at things, right?”

“Well, it is with that attitude!” Susan replied with mock seriousness. Both laughed.

“Come on. Somehow food appeared overnight, so the others have been, for lack of a better term, pigging out. You better get up if you want any.”

“These red things are delicious, and I’m taking the last one!” someone shouted from the other side of the curtain.

Red things? “Apples?”

“Some kind of fruit I guess. Come on, Cloud says he knows which way Sephiroth went, and he’s probably anxious to hear your story.”

“As anxious as I am to tell it, and get your stories in return. Uh, you’ll have to let me go if you want me to get up.”

“Oh yeah, there is that!” Yuffie sprang up and helped Susan up, and both got dressed, then took the curtain down.

“Oh, our sleeper awakes,” said Vincent, a half eaten apple in his hand. “Don’t suppose you know anything about this?” He indicated the now much smaller pile of food her *Create Foodstuffs* spell had made. “I figure strange fruit from a strange girl...”

“Didn’t stop you eating it, though, I see. Yes, I made it last night. Eat it up, it’ll vanish by tonight. It was technically lunch time for me when I arrived. Hopefully since I got a little sleep I should be on your schedule now, but I am starving. I missed dinner, after all, so I’m all screwed up.”

“Your magic can make food?” asked Aerith. “I guess you can do more than let people breathe underwater.”

“Yes, I wanted to ask about that,” said Cloud. “How did you two stay under so long? I was afraid you had been saved only to die in a different way!”

“Let me eat and then I’ll tell my story.”

Cloud seemed to bristle at the delay, but the food was technically hers, so he couldn’t really deny her. He waited as she picked over what was left and got some food in her belly. That done, Sparkle came back in and reported all was quiet outside, but that this place was really weird to her new senses. “And no little critters to chase, either. Usually you would think someplace abandoned like this would be teeming with wildlife. Not so much.”

“Plenty of that where we’re going,” grumped Barret. “Can we get to it?”

“Very well. My name is Susan, and I still don’t think I got all of your names last night.”

They introduced themselves. There was Cloud, Aerith, Barret, Na (the animal, who could also talk Susan was surprised to find. His name was short for Nanaki) Cait Sith (*still not sure what he is*) Cid, Yuffie, and Vincent.

“Got it. I’ll remember them... eventually. Now, here’s the story. I’m from another world, or more accurately, another parallel reality...” Susan told them about her travels, and how she had been sent here to help out. “He said a low level spell I know would solve your biggest problem, and that I would know it when I saw it. Then I got hustled here because Aerith was about to be killed and he didn’t want that. So I know only a little about your physical laws and what *Materia* is capable of, and all that. I have my own powers, of course, so hopefully I won’t need any, but he also said I should get some ideas here so I’m willing to learn all about it.”

“Can you show us a little more about your magic?” asked Cait Sith eagerly.

“Yeah, but I don’t think you should be here, spy!” said Barret, looking pointedly at him. “You’re just going to tell your Shinra buddies and try to find some way to exploit her. I won’t have it.”

“I would need to submit a report based on my observations, yes. We aren’t evil, Barret, we just want what is best for the most people. Yes, certain experiments and such maybe didn’t turn out all that well, I’ll admit. We were just trying to-”

“Line your pockets by killing the planet.”

“Boys!” snapped Tifa, “not now. This is Susan’s turn. You can argue later.”

“Sorry,” said Barret, rolling his eyes.

“The fact remains,” put in Vincent, “we should get a sense of what you can do, if we’re going to fight alongside you. I know roughly what everyone here can do, because I know how

they fight and what *Materia* they've chosen. I can count on them to watch my back. Can I expect the same from you?"

"I can hold my own, if that's what you mean. I can serve as support, healer, and general attacker. I'm slightly above average with a sword, know several different defense spells depending on what's needed, and can both knock people out or set them on fire depending, again, on what's needed. Sparkle, my companion and friend also knows a variety of magic, and together we could probably take pretty much anything." *That wasn't a +1 size modifier or greater. Have to learn Degeneration at some point.*

"Ah, we can stick her in the back row and load her up with HP Plus if we need to," said Cid. "I mean you guys let the spy stay, and if this girl can use magic *without Materia* that's pretty amazing in my book. I'm sure she'll sing out if she sees something she can help us with, right missy?"

"I'll do everything I can to help, you have my word."

"Good enough for me. Sign her up and let's get a move on!"

Cloud shook his head. "We need to make sure she knows who exactly she's fighting. Sephiroth is no joke, and we can't protect her and fight him at the same time."

"I know who you're fighting, better than you do, actually. Let me give you the real scoop, and possibly tell you part of the story you would no doubt tell me. First off, this Sephiroth character; I'm guessing he's more powerful than he has a right to be, and probably has abilities like mine. In other words, he can do things you can't."

"Yeah, like fly about. Love to know how he's managing that," said Cid.

"Or apparently coming back from the dead," put in Tifa.

"So that's a yes," said Susan. "Furthermore, his goal is to somehow suck up all the energy this planet has, grabbing it all for himself. How am I doing so far?"

"Pretty well," Cloud admitted, grudgingly. He also seemed a bit suspicious.

"Like I said yesterday, it's a similar story. I've lived through it twice before, because the being *behind* Sephiroth, that I've named The Darkness and I've heard called Darkvoid, is attacking basically all worlds right now. He wants all the energy of all the realities so he can ascend to even higher dimensions. I've stopped him, with some help of course, both times. Now I have even more skills and tools to find him and stop him, and with your help this world too can be cut off from him forever."

"Dang," said Barret. "We were fighting something like that and didn't even know it? I mean thinking Jenova was an Ancient was bad enough, turns out she's not from outer space but from another reality altogether? You're blowing my mind, little girl!"

"It does explain certain things," said Na. "But raises certain other questions. If this being of darkness is so powerful, why doesn't it just stomp all over us and be done with it?"

"From what I've learned, it could. But that would scatter the energies it wants instead to gather. So it works through agents, and uses their natural abilities, in addition to anything it can figure out what to tell the host it can do. It selects the most powerful, easiest to manipulate people in a world, and goes at it that way." Cloud looked troubled. "But it can be beaten. I've done it. Once by turning an attack it was using against itself, though I can't take credit for that one. Someone else did that, and once directly by just throwing everything from three different worlds at it at once. Magic and technology. That killed the host, forcing the Darkness to flee and allowing other beings like him to seal the world off so it couldn't return."

"And we'll do the same!" promised Barret, smacking his gun arm.

"I don't doubt it."

"I'm bored!" whined Yuffie. "Can we go now?"

Everyone chuckled. "I guess you're in," said Cloud, rising. "With that ringing endorsement. Anyone truly opposed to making her a member of the team?"

"She's AVALANCH material in my book," gruffed Barret. "Welcome to the team!"

Everyone else nodded, smiling, and Susan felt a little glow of pleasure, being accepted into the group.

Don't get too comfortable, they'll turn on you if it suits their needs. Look at them, no military discipline at all. They'll get slaughtered by me, just you wait.

"Okay, you're in the party. You want to take point with me, so we can see what you can

do in combat?"

"Wow, thrown right into it, huh? I guess, but I'm still not clear on all your physical laws yet. It was implied they were a bit different from I was used to, so I'm hesitant."

"Can't be that different," countered Barret. "You see something in front of you that's trying to kill you, you kill them first. End of story."

"And that happens a lot here?"

"How else do you get experience points?"

"I get them by doing things, like having adventures and solving problems. Wait, you know what experience points are?" Susan gave a fangirl like squeal. "This is great!"

"Looks like there's still some explaining to do, but we really do need to get going. We can explain things as we run into them. You're in the party, so you should have access to our inventory. Anything is fair game, that's the rule. If you think you can use something, equip it. Help yourself to the swords, as I take it that's your primary weapon? Any *Materia* that isn't being used, too. Though we've got all the best stuff equipped already."

"Slow down, captain. You lost me at *Inventory*."

"I'm not sure how to explain it. We get a shared space to put stuff and pass it back and forth. Just sort of concentrate on... it? You should have a connection to it now that I've added you to the party."

Susan looked doubtful, but closed her eyes and felt around "inside" herself. To her surprise, she did somehow know that this group had stockpiled what could only be termed "a butt load" of items, from healing to weapons and armor. She reached "into" this space and pulled out a sword that seemed interesting to her.

Huh. It worked. Do these people all have a shared Pocket Dimension they can access at will? Must be nice. Susan was now holding a sword much like her own, that she somehow knew was named "Murasame." She knew it had two linked *Materia* slots and one unlinked one, and had a base attack of fifty one. It also seemed to be raising her "magic" by twelve.

"Good eye," said Cloud, "I just bought that in Wutai. I'm still using my Force Stealer because the *Materia* slots are double growth." He suddenly was holding an oddly shaped blade that flared at the top.

"Wild," said Susan, sliding her blade out of the scabbard. She did the reverse for that one, shoving it into the *Inventory* and it disappeared, leaving her the space to put the new sword in.

"Don't forget to equip some *Materia* into it!" cautioned Yuffie, as she went to slide the blade in. "Here, see the slots?" She pointed them out, and Susan "felt" around to see what kind of *Materia* was free for her to use.

"Okay, just put it in the little holes?" she asked, pulling one out to look at it.

"That's right. Same with armor. Oh, and take an accessory too! What's left, anyway. We'll buy you something that fits you better later."

Accessory? Susan felt around, and sure enough there were items in the inventory that weren't armor, and she pulled out one at random. It was a "white cape" and apparently it protected against the "Frog" and "Mini" conditions.

"I guess you guys don't get resistance checks against things, do you?" They all looked blankly at her. "Yeah, didn't think so." She selected the "Fairy Ring" much as she wanted to see what the "Power Wrist" would do for her, she didn't exactly have a stat called "attack." *Now if I can find something that raised my STRength by 10, then we would really have something. I guess "accessories" are just what I would call imbued items, and this one happens to have several spells stuffed into it. Seems reasonable. But why not wear one ring, one cape, one etc.? Maybe they interfere with each other?*

As for armor she selected "Diamond Bangle." Again there was the "Aurora Armlet" which had a much better "Defense" stat, but she didn't exactly know what that was. The "Bangle" had one more *Materia* slot, and she wanted to experiment. She selected enough *Materia* to fill up all her slots, green, blue, pink, yellow, and red.

"Guess I'm ready!" she exclaimed. "Just one question, how do I actually use this *Materia* stuff?"

"Just will it to happen. You know what each does, right?"

"Yeah, somehow I can just tell. Like this green one is Exit, and this one is Fire. Even

though they look identical.”

“You’ll get the hang of it. Enemies have to wait their turn anyway, so you can take your time and figure it out.”

“They’ll actually stand there until you take your turn?”

“Sure, doesn’t that happen where you come from?”

Now that Susan thought about it, maybe that was true. How many times had she taken a “free action” to tell someone something, or think about things? Probably more than she would care to admit.

“Yeah, I guess so, if you want to be totally accurate about the situation. Okay, lead on, fearless leader!”

Susan made to leave the house, but Cloud put up a hand.

"If we're ready to go, I better rotate you into the party. Vincent, mind sitting this one out for the moment? If she really wants to learn being a ninja from Yuffie, they might as well be together."

"I suppose that would be fine. I do want to see what she can do."

"Settled then. Yuffie, Susan, you're with me." Cloud got a puzzled look on his face.

"Susan, Yuffie, you're with me."

"I heard you," replied Susan. "Is your brain broken all of a sudden?"

"No, I think the world is."

"What are you talking about?" asked Barret.

"It's not a party of three," Cloud replied.

"Hey, man, I count real good up to three. You're one, Susan is two, and Yuffie is three."

"I know that! Tell the world that! Even with Susan I haven't made a party of three, I'm telling you. Something's up!"

"So put Vincent back in the party," suggested Aerith.

"Okay, worth a shot. Susan, *Vincent*, Yuffie, you're with me. I don't believe it, that worked."

"You just made a party of four you know?" asked Barret.

"What are all you people jabbering about?" Susan asked, unable to contain herself any longer.

"Party size," replied Yuffie, as if that explained everything from classical Newtonian physics to Quantum Mechanics in two words.

"Yes, but what does that mean?"

"When we get into fights, only the three people in the main party take part."

Susan stared at the others like they had lost their minds, but they were all nodding like Yuffie had been trying to explain the pointy end of the sword going into someone while you held onto the rounded bit at the other end.

"It works, let's just go. We'll worry about her getting into fights with us later." Cloud left the house, shaking his head.

The trip out of the city was short and uneventful, and now the group was standing at the base of a sheer rock wall, wondering how to get everyone up there.

"I could scale it, and Yuffie probably wouldn't have any trouble," remarked Cloud. "But getting Na or Cait Sith up there? That could be a bit of a problem."

"No problem!" said Susan cheerfully. "I'll just fly up there myself and open a *Teleportal* back here for you all to use. Just hang on a second."

The others watched with either outright skepticism, interest, or both. Susan put *Flight* on herself, taking the extra time so she didn't need to put extra energy in. That done, she flew up and opened a *Teleportal*, allowing the others to simply walk through.

"Is there new stuff in the inventory?" asked Tifa, head cocked to one side as if listening to something.

"Yeah, on the way up I saw these weird boxes just sitting there!" replied Susan. "I opened them up, and found a new *Materia*, a strange looking tiara, a potion of some kind, and some armor. Who do you think left all this crap sitting around? I mean it wasn't in a pile, someone didn't just drop it all there, it was scattered all over."

"That's normal around here," said Cid. "You get used to."

"Oh. Uh, okay? Like party size?"

He nodded.

"Anyway, this is seriously cool!" said Yuffie, sticking her head back and forth through the *Teleportal*. "I'm here, now I'm here. Now I'm here. Now I'm over here again. Look, now I'm-"

"Knock it off!" shouted Cloud.

"Yes, who would have thought magic could produce something like this?" asked Vincent. "Can this take us anywhere?"

Susan shook her head. "Only places I've seen. And as all I've seen of this world is that lost city, the only other place I can take you for now... is there."

"Still, useful."

Na looked over the edge. "More than that, I have no idea how I would have gotten up here otherwise. Thanks for the shortcut."

The group felt icy wind blowing from the mouth of the cave they headed towards, and stood looking at the snowy expanse before them.

"Most of you are going to freeze to death," remarked Susan, looking at the collection of shorts, mini-skirts and barely there jackets on the girls. Na would be okay, *still don't know what that white guy thing is but he does look furry*, and even Barret wasn't dressed for the cold.

"There should be a village somewhat nearby, maybe we can find some shops and get some warmer gear." said Aerith.

"I don't know *Withstand Weather* either. I could cast it from writings, of course."

"You'll never cast it on all of them," protested Sparkle.

"That's a problem all right. Not without spending extra energy, anyway. I could get them in groups, just take the penalty, it's got to only be minus one. Do you guys want to do the same thing? I'll head to the town and just send the *Teleportal* back for you?"

The others traded glances. "We would have had to push on if you weren't around," said Cloud. "I hate to make you do all the work around here. Plus, there's going to be random encounters past this point. I'm actually surprised we got this far without running into anything. Inside the city I can understand, but out there is a different story."

"Random- no, forget I asked." She shook her head. "Party size," she muttered. "Okay, up to you, but if any of you feel your digits freezing off, let me know and we'll head back here. It's not exactly warm, but we could get a fire going in here somehow and warm you up."

"Hey, I know how we could get people warm!" exclaimed Yuffie.

"Don't suggest setting people on fire again," said Vincent.

"Aw, you're no fun."

Susan had to grin, this girl was a regular Pinkie Pie, wasn't she?

That decided, the group pressed on, and didn't get ten steps before the world seemed to swirl and Susan staggered. When her vision cleared she was holding her sword and what looked like three wolves were standing there before her. She looked over, and the three in her "party" were also there, weapons out. Looking further around she noticed the others seemed to have vanished.

"By the creepy stare of my father, what just happened?" Susan demanded.

"Like we said, random encounter," answered Yuffie. "Don't tell me you've never had one before."

"No, I haven't. I've never just been walking along, minding my own business, and suddenly been in the fight for my life."

"Ah, don't be so dramatic," said Vincent. "They don't look that tough. Haven't you got the *Sense Materia*? You could find out for yourself."

"Want to let her take this one?" asked Cloud. The others nodded. "We'll all just *Defend* on our turns and you can get used to things."

"I guess that's for the best." Susan found, to her surprise, that her own *Initiative* seemed to fit into this world perfectly, and she knew exactly when every other person in the battle would act. In fact, now that the battle was on, she knew two of the wolves were faster than her, and one charged her.

"Yipes!" she managed, doing an *Active Dodge*. *Have I ever been in a combat without Acceleration up? Where did Sparkle go, anyway?*

She got a 16 on her dodge, and knew the wolf had gotten a 20. She considered spending 2 XP to get a bonus, but this was only a few meters from the cave. If this was going

to keep happening, she needed a better strategy, and besides, she knew these people had healing magic. *Let's see what they do if it hits me.*

As it did, the world seemed to go wonky again, and it was back in position.

"Ow? I think?" The wolf had hit her, that much was clear. She figured it would try knocking her to the ground, tearing her throat out, but no, it had just somehow damaged her and then run back into position. But where... she couldn't exactly tell. She did however know that her character sheet had changed slightly, and she suddenly had 440 "HP," down from 445. *Is that some kind health indication? This world is weird. And what's my penalty rate now, I don't seem to have one anymore?*

"Odd that it did so little damage," remarked Vincent. "How much HP do you have?"

"Four hundred, base. I think I'm getting a 10% boost from my *HP Plus Materia*."

"Is that all?" He seemed shocked. "I have over two thousand."

"IT'S OVER TWO THOUSAND!" Susan shouted. The others looked at her like she had gone nuts.

"Oh, you don't have that one? Ah, never mind. What were we talking about?"

"I guess it's a good thing it did only slightly damage you, then. Anyway, I think another one is up. What are these things, anyway?"

"Wolves?" ventured Susan.

"No, I don't think so."

The wolf was looking at them like "can I finally take my turn now?" and lunged at Yuffie, doing damage to her. She didn't seem that concerned.

What kind of ninja doesn't even try to dodge? Am I sure I want to learn from this girl? And wait, why are they all standing back here with me in the front?

The others put their weapons into a guard position, *how do you guard with a gun?* and it was Susan's turn. She tried out her *Sense Materia* and suddenly knew these things were called "Bandersnatch", had 860 HP, 100 MP (whatever that was) and were weak to fire.

"Told you," smirked Cloud. "Wolves indeed. What a weird name for something."

"Wait, you know their name now?"

"Of course. You used *Sense*, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did. What now?"

"Now we wait until it's your turn again."

Which it finally was after everyone "defended" again. "I guess I'll try this *Fire Materia* as they're weak to it."

"Sounds like a plan, for go it!" said Yuffie.

Susan concentrated on the *Materia* in her armor, willing it to call forth fire.

Nothing happened.

"Well?"

"I... okay, I tried, but I somehow now know I don't have enough MP. What the heck is MP? The wolf- sorry Bandersnatch, had 100 but I have zero?"

"How do you cast spells then?" asked Vincent.

"I envision the mystic symbology and put energy into it, while speaking the incantation. Usually just the name of the spell, because you can't say much in a half a second or so."

"You really are from another world."

"What's energy?" asked Yuffie.

"You know, putting extra effort into something, like lifting a heavy box?"

"No, you can lift something or you can't, based on your *strength* stat. You can't put extra into it. I mean you could wear an accessory that raised it."

"Okay, you know about stats, but not energy? But apparently you have something similar, you just call it MP. But it's used totally differently."

"Magic Points," offered Cloud.

"Right, Magic 'points.' You have initiative order, but not hit locations. Your health just sort of gets rolled up into one number, which goes up or down depending. This world is like some weird amalgamation of my fathers' and the one I was just at and maybe with some extra bits sprinkled in for good measure that I haven't run into yet."

"The point is, I don't think you'll get much use out of Green *Materia*, or Red" said Vincent. "Which is good to know. We'll have to load you up with Pink and Yellow."

"If we can ever get through *this* combat. Do you want to try something else, they're starting to fall asleep."

The Bandersnatch looked at alert as ever, though slightly confused as to how things were playing out.

"Let me see how much damage I do, then."

She attacked the lead creature with her sword, doing twenty damage to it. *Okay, that means it would take, what? About forty hits for me to take down one of these things? There's got to be something I'm doing wrong here. Of course, I never really was a physical fighter. My STRength is too low.* Almost beyond her control she found herself moving back into her position as well, just like the creature had.

"Great," said Cloud, "you do minimal damage too. Try and steal next time, you have that one, too, right?"

"Yup."

So she tried, but it seemed they didn't have anything to actually steal.

"Pity. That's it for your Yellow, right?"

"Yeah."

"Great. Blow them away, Vincent, and we'll heal up and discuss our next move."

"You got it." Vincent waited for his turn, then stepped up to cast *Lit 2*. Lightning stabbed down out of nowhere and fried the three of them. Oddly, Susan somehow knew that he had received both "HP" and "MP" back for this action, in fact he got more "MP" back than he had actually spent on the attack. The three did a funny little dance, earning them a weird look from Susan, who just stood there.

"Come on, get into the spirit!" chided Yuffie, and suddenly they were back in the snowfield again as if nothing had happened.

"That was surreal!" remarked Susan.

"What was?" asked Sparkle.

"You didn't- no, never mind. And did we just get money for that?" Somehow she knew the party's total *Gil* had gone up by a small amount.

"Yeah, great, isn't it?"

"I guess. You guys all got XP, our *Materia* got a slight boost, and we got richer. Who needs a job, just buy a sword and start slaughtering your way across the countryside. By the time you reach the other side, you're stronger, more capable, and rich. What's not to like?"

Wait, how am I going to get XP? It seems they got 1530 XP for that, which quite honestly would set me up for life. I could spend 200 just on accelerating my training and getting all my skills up to a ten in like a month. I would be set for life, but it seems they would need to fight hundreds more of the things to raise their levels. Am I not going to be able to learn anything here?

"It's a living," said Vincent with a shrug.

"And what was that lighting thing all about, anyway? Did I really see you get *more* MP than you spent on that attack? How is that fair? And how did I even know that?"

He grinned. "It only works out that way in larger groups. It was pretty close that time, actually. If it had been five it would have been even better. I might have completely healed myself. Here, take a look." He popped two *Materia* off his armor and handed them to her. As she touched them, she realized they gave back 1/100 of damage done as MP and 1/10 as HP.

"These are just cheating. How did you even get something like this?"

"They were in Wutai. Just kind of sitting around, oddly enough now that you mention it. They're pretty rare, I've never seen another copy. I'm hoping to make another set though."

"I wonder why," she remarked, handing them back. "That was certainly educational."

"For all of us. Do you want to stay in the party?" asked Cloud.

"Try your healing magic on me, see if I'm actually cured, then I'll answer that question."

They did, and she was.

"Okay, then I think I will. For one, my *Materia* did get their funny XP they seem to want in order to grow. Even if I can't use Green, I can use the stuff you guys aren't and raise it. And a little damage is better than none, right? I'd like to try my magic, too, though if that's going to

happen every couple of steps I'll have to save it for emergencies. I don't think I can take energy from you guys as you don't have any. And your recovery items won't work on me, because they restore MP not energy."

"Putting yourself in danger to raise *Materia* for us? I knew I liked you for a reason," said Yuffie with a smile.

Susan shook her head ruefully. "I need to figure out how to do damage around here. If that's the best I can do, there's no way I can help you take down Sephiroth. I guess she was right, he really would have just slaughtered me when I first arrived, huh?"

"Probably," put in everyone.

HAHA. Not so great here, are you?

Quiet, you.

Susan learned she could not carry Sparkle into fights, she would just find herself back in the same position she entered them in, Sparkle none the wiser. However, Cloud could include her in the "party" and she would be brought in, making Barret go a little cross eyed at the new party of five.

Susan learned that they had a *Shrink* magic they called "mini" and it didn't help increase the damage to creatures it was cast upon. All it did was take their damage down to one, which she supposed was useful. *Deflection* worked just fine, and they were actually raising some *Cure Materia* to get a *Regen* spell, which worked the same as her *Regeneration*.

Invulnerability worked as advertised, making her breathe a sigh of relief. *At least if we do run across something nasty, that and Barrier Against Spells should do the trick.* Her *Ally* and *Legion* worked quite differently. She brought out the *Legion*, who each did one attack on the enemy she specified, and then went away again. Same with the *Ally*. The others considered that as her local equivalent to a *Summon Materia*, and she was blown away when they showed her what they meant.

That amazement went both ways, as the group was rather impressed by the sheer amount of spells the two knew between them. After several fights trying stuff, Susan felt she could contribute best to those fights the others called "boss creatures" like that Jenova thing they had been fighting when she rescued Aerith. As long as she wasn't too wasteful with her energy and stuck to physical attacks in "minor" combats like these, she felt confident she could contribute meaningfully.

"Think you've got the hang of it?" asked Cloud, the five of them having run around outside the village so she could try a bunch of things.

"I know what works and what doesn't. I might look into some more damaging spells, now that I know casting time isn't an issue here either." It seemed that no matter how long Susan cast for, enemies would just stand there and wait, allowing her to put extra time, rather than effort, into casting. That didn't raise her effective planet rating like energy did, but for the higher level spells that might not be so much of an issue. She would let them take out the mobs they seemed to think it was normal to slaughter on their journey around the world, and she could take out the big things for them. It seemed a reasonable compromise.

And there's the new spells that Silverstreak gave me. I haven't looked over the Elemental ones that much yet. There might be something good there.

So the group entered the town, and Cloud looked around. "Let's check the town out, see what's going on in this part of the world, and continue after Sephiroth. We have to keep going north, and that means down the mountainside. We'll have to figure out a way to all get down there."

"One thing at a time, let's see if there's any good *Materia* here," said Yuffie, giving a little hop and throwing one fist in the air.

"Yes, Yuffie, we'll check for *Materia*. Honestly."

Susan was shocked as Cloud seemed to pick a random house in town, and without knocking or even seeing if someone was home, opened the door and let himself inside. Yuffie followed.

"I'll check over there," said Vincent, going into yet another house as Susan watched,

fully expecting cops or something to swarm out of nowhere. Or at least the sound of gunfire and people screaming about intruders.

“Just a grounded kid with a snowboard, could be useful,” said Cloud, coming out. “Have to keep that in mind. Let’s check that one next.” They headed off in that direction.

THESE PEOPLE ARE CRIMINALLY INSANE! Cloud just opened up another door, letting himself inside.

Are you sure you don’t want me to wipe them out for you? asked The Darkness. *Because I’d be happy to. It’s no trouble.*

Susan left the others to their breaking and entering, as Tifa was waving her arms trying to get her attention. She was standing outside a house, having just come from the inside.

"Come on, we found something!" she called, motioning Susan forward.

"These people are so getting arrested," Sparkle remarked.

"I know, right? What is wrong with them?"

But she walked over and Tifa pulled her inside. Looking around, it was clear no one had been here for some time, as dust lay thick everywhere inside. Susan couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard someone crying, and looked at Tifa questionably.

"Yeah, it's Aerith. You better see for yourself."

Susan walked through the entranceway to see Aerith, transfixed by a monitor screen and watching what seemed to be a log entry by a man in a white lab coat. The others were poking around or looking embarrassed, so Susan went over to see what was up.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Aerith as she got near. "Look at me, going to pieces like this." She wiped her eyes.

"What is this place? Do you recognize these people?" She tapped the screen.

She nodded sadly. "That's my mother and father. And this?" She spread her arms wide and turned around. "This must be the house I was born in."

"Wow, Aerith, I... I don't know what to say."

"It's okay. I didn't even remember what she looked like before this. Or the sound of her voice. But here it is, after all these years. I was so young when she was killed. So young."

"Then it's a rare treasure indeed." Both stood silently as they watched the logs, as Aerith's mother and father talked about various things, from Ancients and Cetra to Weapon and the "crisis for the planet." The last entry showed soldiers in blue uniforms bursting in and marching them off.

"Shinra!" said Tifa, and both jumped. Neither had heard her approaching. *Maybe I should be taking my ninja lessons from her.*

"You know those goons?" asked Susan, tapping the screen again, after rewinding the footage a bit.

"They're the cause of most of the planet's troubles," she explained. "Shinra Electric. Turning Mako into electricity without regard for the consequences."

"We'll see them get their due someday!" promised Barret.

"Wait, you're at war with an electric company?"

"Not just any electric company," he explained. "They got big that way, yes. But after that it was news feeds, and space exploration, and genetic experiments. All in their search for the 'Promised Land.' Makes me sick."

"Wait, back up. Mako... I saw that referenced once before. That's another word for Lifestream, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Okay, let me get this clear in my mind." Susan began to pace. "This company discovered a method to turn *Spirit Energy* into electrical power, much like burning coal or something to drive turbines, right?"

"Don't get me started on coal," growled Barret.

"Fair enough. Maybe they didn't realize it was *Spirit Energy*, just something like oil they could burn. Whatever. This company then became so rich it started branching out into other fields, according to you."

"That's right."

"What I don't understand is that you *do* already have a method of generating electricity, and without messing about with converting from one form to another."

"Yeah, coal, like you said."

"No, no, I mean magic. I just saw Vincent call down lighting out of the clear sky. He even got more MP than he spent, so he could sit and do that all day as long as he was

fighting something. And it seems monsters just show up as you walk around, because in the ten minutes we were out in the cold there didn't seem to be any less of them."

"What's your point?"

"The point is, lure a bunch of monsters into a chamber designed to absorb lighting and put it into batteries. Or just have a bunch of people cast lighting into it and then give them recovery items to get back MP. It doesn't tire you guys out to cast magic, you could do it all day. Do you know how much electrical power is in a bolt of lighting?"

"A lot?"

"Yeah, a lot. Or say that's a bad idea. Maybe it won't work because you can't channel the power fast enough into the batteries. Fine. Get a big pot of water and use the 'Yuffie Style' of heat generation. Cast fire on it. Heat that puppy up and you get steam. The steam drives turbines, flows through some pipes, and people on the other end cast ice magic on it, turning it back into liquid water. It's fed into the tanks again and the process repeats. Set up stations like that all over the world and your power needs are met forever." She whirled on Aerith. "You want to get back at Shinra? Want to totally destroy them? Fine! Put them out of business by being a better electric company than they are. I mean I don't know what *Materia* exist, but I came up with two ways of generating power just from what I've seen you guys use in combat so far. There must be others."

The others were quite taken aback, and kept looking from one to the other.

"Hey, you think that could work?" asked Barret.

"The Shinra cooperation thanks you for your excellent ideas," said Cait Sith. "Would you like a job with us? I think you would make an excellent researcher."

"Stupid cat! I'll kill you myself!" Barret's gun arm started to spin up.

"I was just joking! Only joking! I wouldn't tell them about it, honest! This is just a robot body, remember? Don't forget your daughter!"

"Aggh!"

"Wait, what? You're just a robot?" Susan looked closer at him. "Wow, I didn't even know. That's some fine craftsmanship there, actually."

"Thank you," he said, looking a little embarrassed, though how that was possible for a robot Susan couldn't say. "We at the Shinra Corporation do take pride in... actually, scratch that thought."

"You better. Dang! I'm checking out the rest of this town. You one messed up girl, you know what?"

He stormed out.

"What did I say? And Yuffie's probably already stolen the town blind, so don't bother looking," she shouted after him.

"She probably has, come to think of it," Tifa agreed.

Aerith burst out laughing, and after a moment, Tifa joined her. Aerith's eyes were still shining with tears, but she came over and hugged Susan. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"Nothing, if you don't know. I do feel a little better though."

Cid cleared his throat. "You know kid, I think you're gonna fit in just fine. I just joined this little group not so long ago myself. And I think you've done more to lift spirits here than I ever could. Good on you. Come on, boys, let's let the girls have a moment."

He and the others left, leaving the three girls alone in the house.

"Do you want to be alone? This is your house, after all, right?" asked Susan.

Aerith quickly shook her head. "No. Right now I think I'd like to be among friends, if that's okay."

"Friends."

"Always," agreed Tifa.

They watched the videos again, and Susan could see a lot of her mother in Aerith. They were both beautiful, and while their eyes held a great pain that only they could see, (especially when Ifalna spoke of being the last Cetra or about the 'crisis') they didn't let it drag them down. She also saw the same wisdom and bearing that Aerith seemed to possess, like they had knowledge, terrible knowledge, but didn't lord it over anyone that they did.

"I think she would have been proud of you, surviving like you did," Susan said quietly when the last video was done. "I wish I could have met her."

"She was a strong woman, and you are too, Aerith," put in Tifa. "You're right there in the thick of things with us, never shying away from combat or doing what has to be done. You even would have sacrificed yourself for us. I... don't know if I could have gone through with that, if I was in your shoes." She paused a moment. "I can't believe what the Shinra did to you, and I thought I knew all the horrible things they had done in the past. What other atrocities will be revealed on our journey?"

"I guess we won't find out sitting around here," Aerith replied, with forced cheerfulness. "I bet the guys are off freezing somewhere, too dumb to come in out of the cold."

"Yeah, it's a good thing they have us to look after them, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"Look, Aerith, we can't take this with us, but as long as I'm with you, if you ever want to come back, just say the word. My *Teleportal* is at your disposal."

"Thanks. But I've seen her now. Heard her voice. I'll always remember."

Susan nodded, and the girls stood up again. Aerith took a deep breath, looking around one last time.

"Come on, let's take care of Sephiroth and get this over with. Time to reminisce about the past when our future is secure."

When they went outside, it seemed Cloud and the others were having some kind of argument with people in dark suits, and Shinra soldiers were blocking the path out of time.

"The serpent wakes," muttered Susan.

"Oh no!" cried Aerith.

"We can take them," assured Tifa. They went to see what the fuss was about, but as they got nearer Cloud dodged a punch thrown by the woman in the suit, and she went tumbling down the mountainside.

"Should I get after her, make sure she's all right?" she asked, rushing up to peer past Cloud.

"She's tough, she'll be fine," remarked Cloud. "You all ready to go?"

Susan saw that the others had bundled up, and looked ready to go. "We'll have to fight our way out," she said, pointing back the other way.

"No, no, it's this way we have to go. North. I'm going to see if I can't borrow that snowboard and we'll just slide down there."

"Uh, that's all well and good, but how are the rest of you going to get down there? We can't all fit on one snowboard."

"Oh, yeah, you're right. What... huh."

"We are dealing with a real mind here. You and I can go down, with *Flight* magic on, because I don't want to be alone in this crazy world I can't hardly do anything to. When we're safe, I'll send the *Teleportal* back for the others. Meanwhile, Aerith and Tifa can do some shopping and get some more appropriate clothes. I'll just get my heavy jacket out of my *Pocket Dimension*. The rest of you, hang out at the Inn. I'll open the *Teleportal* over in Aerith's house, and come get you. I don't want anyone else seeing it, after all."

"Oh, and I was so looking forward to snowboarding down," said Cid, sarcastically. "Too bad. Too bad."

"You're welcome to!" Susan invited. "I could make you one with my magic if you give me say a minute and a half. What do you say?"

"Which was the Inn? Come on you slackers, follow me."

Sparkle jumped up on Susan's shoulders but Susan said she would just take the full time and she could fly on her own. Sparkle agreed, and the three said their goodbyes and were off.

"Hey, this is kind of fun!" shouted Cloud, skimming the snow on the way down the mountain. "I can see what Sephiroth sees in it, anyway."

"Glad you're enjoying yourself. Hey, who do you like better? Aerith or Tifa?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Just curious."

"Don't even go there."

"Tree!"

"Yipes!" He dodged at the last second.

Susan chuckled. *Thought so. Nice reflexes, too.*

The path split, and Susan and Cloud went right and then left, ending in what would have been a jump that dumped them nearly at the base of a cliff they saw in the distance. Both hovered over the ground, looking at the desolation around them. There was a single tree in view, and Susan wondered how it got enough light and water to survive. There was no melting going on around here, after all.

Susan's *Spirit Sense* was tingling, and she got a 2 on her check, which was garbage. She felt it was important enough to spend an energy and get *Augment Skill* going. This gave her a much better result, a 16(-2 for the spell), one from max. (She hadn't put any extra in, so she had a 7 in the skill currently.)

"There's a huge mass of *Spirit Energy* ahead of us, that's for sure," she informed Cloud. "But there's something else."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, if you hadn't told me, I could easily believe that *Materia* is related to *Spirit Energy* in some way. This is a very dead area, so sources of it really stand out. Come on, this way I think." She and Cloud flew north east, then directly north, and Susan homed in what she was feeling with another check. She got the same 16, and bent down to dig in the snow.

"Tada!"

"*Materia*? Way out here? Nice find."

"Thanks. And I think there's another close by. Come on." She put the sphere into the communal inventory and wondered if someone back at the village would notice it there.

They flew back the way they came and a bit north again, coming to the mouth of a cave, which they entered. Inside was a strangely pale woman in what could almost be called a bathing suit, who jumped up as they approached.

"Hello!" said Susan. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

"Out here? I live here!" said the woman. "What are you two doing all the way out here?"

"Making our way north, do you know what we can expect from here out?"

"A lot more snow and then a wall of solid rock. Best turn around now while you're not frozen."

"I must go forward!" protested Cloud.

"Your funeral. You want something?"

"Do you have any *Materia*? I thought I felt some around here."

"Felt? Can't feel *Materia*, can you?"

"Not exactly. I feel the spiritual power within it. As it's basically life energy, and I can sense life energy."

"Can you now? You must be pretty special."

"I suppose. So do you have it?"

"Maybe. I'm not just going to give it away free, though. I want something from you in return."

"Name it."

"It's kind of embarrassing, but I want to travel."

"I can't make you fly, if that's what you're thinking. At least, not for long."

"No, no. I stuck here in this ice cube because, well, technically I'm a snow monster. I mean you can see I'm not human."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

Both laughed. "But since you didn't have your companion over there start swinging his sword around the instant he saw me, I thought I would take a chance. Maybe you can trade me? If you're some kind of *Materia* hunters then maybe you've found something in your travels that could keep me from melting. Then I could leave here and take a look at the wider world."

“Literally melting? Like you’re actually made of snow?”

“I am actually made of snow. I can’t help it, but I want to feel the sun on my face. It’s silly, I know-”

“No it’s not. You may be more human than you give yourself credit for.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because humans strive. They want what they cannot have because sometimes, with hard work or whatever, they can have it. Without that motivation to become more than they are, well, they’re little better than trees. As for your problem,” she popped her book out of her *sub-space pocket*. “Let’s see what my book of magic has to say about the situation, shall we?”

She looked over the new Neptune spells, which had been put in order along with the others. She was most interested in *Deep Freeze*, a new spell to keep ice from melting. It was grade 4, but she figured she could read it over, but more importantly, P. Which could also be a problem.

“Shoot, it may wear off,” she explained. “The reasons why are... wait a second, I can actually ask! Stay right here.” Susan went to the other end of the cave and pressed the button on her watch, then touched Silverstreak’s face when it popped up.

“Yes?” asked one of his agents, their face appearing on the screen.

“Susan Felton, I have a question about *Paragon* magic if you’re familiar with it?”

“Just a second and I can look it up. What’s the question?”

“If I cast a P spell, and I die, the spell goes away. What happens if I cast a P spell and then leave the reality? I haven’t died, but I’m not around anymore either. I can’t exactly check, but maybe someone looked into it once?”

“Ah, let’s see here... Yes, here it is. Yes, leaving the reality seems to actually break the bond between the caster and the spell. It will continue in your absence, and even through your death.”

“That’s very good to know. Thank you!” *So the sword I made is still around, that’s nice to know.*

“Sure thing. Let us know if anything else comes up.”

“I will.”

The face faded, and Susan turned back to the others. “Okay, we can do this. Give me a minute to read it over.”

Susan did, getting a 17 on *Magical Scripture* to read it and a 21 on *Magical Theory* to understand it. That done, she realized there was another snag. “How much do you weigh?”

“How should I know?”

“Ah. Now there’s a useful spell, something to tell the weight of an object. Oh well.” *I can use Magic Combat to estimate the distance to a target, but not the weight? Seems like an oversight to me.*

“May I?” asked Cloud, walking over to her.

“May you what?” she asked, taking a step back.

“Lift you. I want to see how heavy you seem.”

“I guess that’s okay.”

Cloud scooped her up. “Oh, she’s not that heavy at all, really!”

“All right, but I better give the spell some extra oomph in any case. Sheesh, just when you need a *Ley Line* you’re out in the middle of a frozen wasteland. Such is my lot. Sparkle?”

“You got it. *Energetic Accumulation.*”

“And now for my part. Come over here, I’ll need to touch you.”

“You won’t find it, you know, if you just kill me.”

“If I wanted you dead I would have had my friend cut you to pieces. Come on, when it comes to it you’re not going to trust me?”

“I... okay.” The snow lady came over and Susan put her hand on her leg. (Her book being on the floor where she was currently sitting) She did feel made of ice, and Susan wondered how such a being could even be sentient, much less express desires like this creature could.

Can more creatures they’ve killed along the way think like this? If they had met Na in the wild, would they just have killed him and moved on? It bears thinking about.

She read the spell over, then put the accumulated 22 energy into it, making sure she could get 27kg of ice with the spell. (It was 1kg per rating) She wasn't sure how much she succeeded by, but she knew the spell had worked.

"Done!" she announced. "You won't melt from now on."

"What, ever?"

"Well... if someone cast really high level fire magic on you, or maybe a dragon breathed fire on you, maybe a little. But for the most part, no."

"You don't mind if I test it, do you?"

"No, no, please," replied Susan, waving her hand and putting her book back. "But how-"

She grabbed cloud and hugged him, holding him close.

"Uh..."

"Oh, deal with it big guy. Oh, you're warm all right. Stay close now." The pair waited a moment. "I don't seem to be melting. But there's one more test. Come with me."

She led them south, then north west, where they came to a hot springs of all things, which the lady stuck a toe into it.

"I used to hate this place," she admitted. "It's the only place around here that could kill me. I seem to be fine though. I guess there's just one more thing to do."

Susan thought that might be handing over the *Materia* but instead the lady dived headfirst into the water!

"Oh great, we got suckered!" moaned Cloud. "Now we'll never get- Oh."

"The water's great, come on in!" said the lady, bobbing up to the surface again. "This is amazing!"

"I'm sure it would be. But getting out again, that's where we might have a little bit of a problem," said Susan.

The lady laughed. "I guess you're right." She held up a hand and Susan and Cloud pulled her out of the water. "I owe you a *Materia*," she admitted, and held out a red orb. "Take it with my thanks. I'm going to get out of here and see the world. Thank you."

"My pleasure," said Susan, accepting it. The lady turned and started to walk away, then thought twice. "Oh, just head up there and then keep going north to get to the cliff. Don't die, okay? Bye!" She waved and disappeared down the path.

"You certainly do things differently," Cloud admitted, as they once started flying north again. "I wouldn't have hesitated to cut that creature down, but you actually spoke to it and helped her out. I can't say I would do the same, I need XP, but it does make me question if just doing that without regard to the consequences is really the best thing."

"Only you can decide that for yourself," Susan told him. "Now come on, the cliff is just ahead, race you!"

"And that's why we have to get up the cliff," finished Cloud, having told part of his story to the lone man they had found in the house. As usual, he had simply barged into the place, leaving Susan to follow in his wake, shaking her head in disbelief. The man was quite unsurprised at this behavior, merely greeting them and saying he didn't get much company out this far. While Cloud had been talking, Susan went and opened her *Teleportal*, stepping through and going to find the others.

"We're at the next leg of our journey," she explained. "Oh, and here." She threw the Blue *Added Cut Materia* to Vincent, who caught it and looked it over. Yuffie also perked up and came to peer over his shoulder.

"This will be quite useful," he said gratefully, rearranging his *Materia*. "Being able to attack while I use my lighting combo? Very nice. Where did you get it?"

"Found it in the snow down the cliff. Seems I can sniff them out, so to speak. As long as there isn't too much other *Spirit Energy* interference in the area, anyway. Maybe as I get better at *Spirit Sense* I'll be able to do even better." *Not that I can, given our XP isn't exactly compatible.*

"You can sense where *Materia* are?" asked Yuffie. "I knew there was a reason I liked you!"

"Here, got you a present too." She tossed the Red summon over, and Yuffie plucked it out of the air. "Alexander? He does Holy type damage, not many things do that. Thanks."

"It's for the group. I just wanted to make sure you saw it."

"Sure, sure, the group. I'll just put it back in the inventory, shall I?"

"There's a weapon shop next door, if you want to pick up a new sword. I think it's quite a bit better than the one you're using. Cloud will want to keep raising his *Materia* in the double growth one, but I figure we should pick it up just in case. Thought maybe you might want to buy it yourself."

"I'll take a look, thanks."

Barret went into the shop with her, which was the building next to Aerith's house, and they went inside.

"Ah, is this the girl you were talking about?" asked the shopkeeper.

"That's her. Let's see the sword."

"Sure thing." He got out a wicked looking sword that was more like a really stretched out ax blade than the thin katana like sword she had been using. She checked the slots, and the owner nodded appreciably. "Six of them, miss, four linked. What are you using now, if you don't mind me enquiring?"

"Murasame."

"Ah, yes, I know that blade. This will give you 12 more attack, 3 more magic and 3 more hit percentage. A fine weapon, this. It's called Organics."

"Why are *Materia* slots always paired?" she asked, still running her fingers over the grooves.

"They aren't, like that one has two that aren't."

Susan looked up. "No, no. What I mean is, why don't we see three linked slots? Or even four? Why can't I put an *Enemy All* on the center slot, and then a fire to the left and ice to the right, and have them both fall under *Enemy All*? Why do I have to waste a slot with another *Enemy All*?"

The shopkeeper actually looked uncomfortable. "Why, no sword like that exists, miss. Never heard of such of thing. Have you heard of such a thing, sir?"

"I don't know much about *Materia*, but Susan has a point. Why do they only come in pairs?"

"I think if you could answer that question, you would be the greatest smith who ever lived."

"Hummmmm." Susan was suspicious of his evasion. *But can't guns take Materia slots*

as well? They aren't "forged" are they? In fact, why in a world of modern guns is anyone using a sword anyway? Seems rather odd if you ask me. She hefted the blade, oddly it didn't really seem heavier than her other sword. "And 12 more attack, you say?"

"That's right miss!" He seemed relieved to be back to safer territory.

"Why is that?" she asked Barret. "I mean how can one sword cause more damage than another?"

"Well, look at it," said Barret. "You're using that thin little twig of a blade now, right? This one has some heft on the downswing, you better believe it."

"It is a chopping weapon, I guess."

"Plus it's sharper," put in the shopkeeper. "Better edge, more cutting power."

Susan stared at him, mind awl. "He's right," she said to Sparkle, who stopped licking her face and looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way I calculate damage is screwed up, isn't it? I can make a TR 10 sword blade, right? I've done it, twice. That should be the sharpest thing in existence. Yet that is meaningless when I go to hit someone with it. Like take a steak, right? Try and cut it with a kitchen knife and you'll be there all night. Knife isn't sharp enough. But sharpen the knife a little and it gets easier. Now imagine the sharpest knife in existence. Shouldn't it nearly pass through the meat without resistance? It should be the same with a sword- I chop someone up with a TR 10 blade and their limbs should go flying. But they don't, because only my STStrength is a factor when doing damage."

"I admit, I never thought much about it. TR usually just means if you *can* cut a surface or not, not how much damage you do."

Susan started to pace about the store, staring at the Organics. "Why are light sabers so feared in the Star Wars universe?"

"Because they're used by Jedi, people with superhuman reflexes and decades of training? And they can bounce blaster fire back?"

"I mean apart from all that. Anyone can pick one up and with a wave chop through limbs like butter. Or robots. Or walls. If that's not TR 10 then what is? Yet even if I got hold of one, I would still only do my pitiful 1d6 damage while hitting something with it. Should one even be considered size 0, and those things are thin. I mean this is +1 for sure! That can't be right."

"I admit, this sword doing twelve 'more' damage does seem to make more sense, given it could be sharper, and differently weighted, than the previous blade you were using."

"So... are you going to buy the blade or not?" asked the shopkeeper.

Susan mentally checked the party's funds, and they had plenty to cover it.

"Sure. How do I even get *Gil* out of inventory, anyway? It just sort of passed into it when we beat up monsters. I don't think I've actually seen a single *Gil*."

"Here." Barret handed the money over. Susan still didn't catch exactly what it looked like.

"Thank you, sir. And miss. A good day to both of you." He seemed quite relieved to have these weirdoes out of his shop.

Why does a weapon shop even exist in this remote location? Do these people really need that many weapons around here? She paused. Though I suppose in a word of "random encounters" they probably do!

She transferred her *Materia* to the blade, added one more into the empty slot, and "equipped" it, shaking her head the whole time. *I didn't get to ask why my magic should get better because of the sword I'm using. Maybe the quality of the metal brings out more power in the Materia?*

And so, the group was now warm in Mr. Holzoff's hutt, and he was explaining how dangerous the climb up the cliff was.

Susan, still thinking about damage and *Materia* and slots and blade sharpness and exactly how much Yuffie liked her and they hadn't known each other for very long and was she just joking around because love at first sight was totally a myth right and finding someone who liked girls in this small a group was probably not realistic but how did she know what the

percentage was on this world it could be double hers or even higher so- "Climb?" Every eye turned towards Susan. "We aren't climbing the dang thing. I'll go up first, just like before. By the time we meet Sephiroth I'll only be at about half energy, but it can't be helped. That's if there isn't too much more between us and him."

"We could rest for a little while," suggested Cloud. "We've gained time, not having to fight our way through the snowfields to get here. And we'll gain more flying up the side of the cliff. The tradeoff is XP and dropped items. We need to be as high a level as possible if we're going to match Sephiroth. So I'm not sure which is more important now."

"I can't help you there. Our two physical laws are too different. I seem to have adapted to HP but your XP doesn't help me. I'm happy to raise *Materia* though, so if you want to do some combats, sleep here if you don't mind Mr. Holzoff, and start again in the morning, that's fine."

"No, I want to press forward. If you can get us up the cliff safely, so much the better. This is our world so it should be our fight. You get us there, we'll take care of it."

"Okay. If that's what you've decided, that's what we'll do. See you in a few moments, everyone."

Susan put *Flight* back on herself and Sparkle, and headed up the first leg of the journey towards the top of the cliff. About half way up she spied a cave, and poked her head in.

"Think there might be treasure in here, like before?" she asked Sparkle.

"It's not that far, go back and ask."

"Good point."

"There's a cave partway up. Then another, probably a connecting cave, that leads to the second climbable area. You want to go through the cave? You can probably get more of your 'random encounters' there and may find some treasure."

"A good compromise," said Na. "Who knows what we might find inside such a lonely cave?"

All the others nodded, so Susan opened the *Teleportal* to the cave entrance, and they all thanked Mr. Holzoff for his hospitality.

"Sure thing. You guys stay safe now. Even if you can open holes in the air, which is quite a sight let me tell you. What will you kids think of next?"

Once inside the cave, Cloud and the others fought some giant Icicles, bats, dragons! and other assorted creatures. They found a new lance for Cid, some armor, and an Enhance Sword which Susan immediately took and equipped, feeling stupid for having bought a new sword not twenty minutes ago. This one, according to Cloud, had a lower 'attack' than the other, but the *Materia* slots were linked. She put in some Green and Blue *Materia*, as well as linking Alexander to *Elemental*, so at least her sword did Holy type damage. She couldn't summon him, but he could still be useful to her in that way. *Have to have the book take a look at this Materia later, wonder if it could get the "holy" element out of it, and I could learn elemental spells with that property?*

She also did a bunch of *Stealing* and *Sensing*, vowing to get the latter *Materia* on top of her book so it could be analyzed. *After all, telling something's health level, energy level, and weaknesses? That would be nice.*

There were spells like *Reveal Defenses* but this was a bit different. She was interested to see what it would come up with. *Though, I could just pop it into the old Sub-space pocket. It's tiny, and doesn't need my magic to work...*

Finally they came to a weird red question mark looking thing floating in a field of blue energy.

"When did we save last?" asked Cloud, walking over to it. "With Susan rushing us ahead like this, I've not paid attention."

"Since before she showed up. We have been rather casual about that," answered Tifa. "Who was in charge of- oh."

"Sorry, that was me," said Aerith. "After Susan rescued me, I just sort of forgot about it."

I guess being ready to die will do that to you. Sorry everyone.”

“Okay, you’re all speaking Greek again. What is this thing?”

“It’s a save point. Usually they appear right before a major battle. That way if we all fall, we can try again from where we last saved. It’s pretty handy.”

“You can ‘try again?’ What does that mean, exactly? You can rewind time itself?”

“Don’t have those either?” asked Cid. “That must be tough. Every choice you make better be the right one then!” The others all laughed.

“Wait, wait. If you guys can do that, my saving her was pointless. You would have just gone back in time, and tried something new, right?”

Cloud shook his head. “Aerith planned it too well. We didn’t know where she was going, we had to try and track her down. We couldn’t go without saving for that long, it’s too dangerous. By the time we had caught up, we had saved several times. How did you get there, anyway? We had to take the Tiny Bronco.”

“What was left of it,” complained Cid.

“Oh, one way or another,” she answered, mysteriously.

Cloud scowled at her, not liking that answer.

Okay, one more thing to let my book analyze, if we can find one near a bed.

“Are there any of these near beds?”

“Beds?” Cloud asked. They all looked at each other. “I think there’s one near the beds at the reactor with the huge bird on top.”

“Remind me to insist we spend a night there at the earliest convenience.”

“You got it,” said Cloud, touching the save point, which glowed briefly. “We go there pretty often anyway, as Shinra keeps attacking the place to get their reactor back.”

“Hey, this little pond is great!” said Yuffie, taking a drink. “I just got all my HP and MP back!”

“They must bottle this stuff for *Elixirs* or something,” said Barret, also taking a drink. Susan waited until everyone else had some, and shrugged and took a drink herself. She found she had full energy again!

“Hey, now we’re talking! Why didn’t you guys tell me springs like this existed?”

“Never seen one before,” explained Aerith. “Glad it worked for you.”

They then took out a weird two headed dragon, were Susan successfully stole a *Protect Ring*, and passed into the crater. All around, green energy swirled and lighting threatened their every step.

“Wow. If it wasn’t for the devastation this area would be really pretty,” remarked Susan. “Look at that light show!”

The others agreed, and made their way across some perilously narrow walkways towards the center. Black cloaked men were seen, shuffling along and dying, and Susan had to wonder, given the trails it took them to get there, how these insane people had done so. It didn’t look like they moved all that fast, either. Yuffie seemed quite excited to find another Red *Materia*, which she named “Neo Bahamut,” while Vincent took the Blue “*MP Turbo*” *Materia* they found, saying it would help his lighting combo quite nicely. They got attacked by some weird creatures in the pit, but the path was short, and there was another *Save Point* in the center. They used it and pressed on, coming to a winding path where they saw Sephiroth himself, cutting down men in black cloaks like he was mowing grass.

“Ah, the girl from nowhere!” he exclaimed, coming over to them. “Bringing me a second chance to finish what I started?”

“Leave Aerith alone, Darkness. Your fight is with me.”

“Darkness? My name is Sephiroth, Susan. Perhaps you have me confused with someone else?”

“I know who I’m talking to. Plus you just called me by name, dummy, so I know it’s you.”

He laughed. “Ah, so I did. Suppose I don’t need to hide it anymore. Anyway, all I need to do is delay you all long enough to use the *Black Materia*. See you!”

He flew away, but left in his place another one of those weird monster things, and Yuffie got a kick out of using her new Neo Bahamut to smack it around. Susan had to admit,

watching the enormous dragon swoop down and shoot an energy blast at it was rather satisfying. She kept the party healthy with items and used what magic she could, but it seemed off to be fighting opponents that just stood there and took what the others dished out. Plus the creature didn't seem to get worse at anything as it took damage. She supposed it balanced out because neither did her friends, or her, but it still seemed strange to her.

This was no tactical way of fighting, as she chose her action, did that action, and then stood there waiting for the others to take their actions. She couldn't attack from cover, or use the terrain to her advantage. *Not that I really ever did that anyway, did I?* She had to admit, seeing her new friends in action up close against a "boss" let her know just how powerful they were.

Suddenly, Cloud took a hit and yelled "Enough of this. Limit Break! Meteorain!" He swung his sword above his head, generating a circle of wind around himself. After that he jumped in the air, and from out of his *sword* came a bunch of *rocks*. They smashed into the creature and finished it off.

"Victory pose!" said Yuffie, spinning in place. "It didn't stand a chance."

Okay, what was that? This world continues to surprise me.

With the creature dead and the world returned, Cloud bent down to pick up a floating black piece of rock, and the others all looked extremely relieved.

"The *Black Materia*," breathed Aerith. "He just left it? Why?"

"I don't know," replied Cloud. "But it's good for us. We keep this away from him, and there's no *Meteor*. Susan, you have that magical space that we don't, right? I don't want this in our inventory, or anywhere near me. Can you keep it safe?"

"I take it this is one dangerous chunk of rock?" Susan asked, looking it over.

"With that, in this place, Sephiroth could summon a meteor from space and destroy the planet," Aerith explained.

"*Pocket Dimension* it is, then!" Susan stuck it inside, and everyone visibly relaxed.

"Come on, Sephiroth himself is just up ahead. We'll take him out, the threat is over, and we can all go home."

Everyone smiled, even Susan. *Some of us are going to spend a few days having my book near a few interesting things I've seen, and maybe get some training from Yuffie, but I do share their sentiment.*

"I don't like it," said Sparkle, hanging back with Susan. "Why would he leave that here with us? It doesn't make sense."

"You're right, it is strange. But it's out of the way now. You think it's a fake of some kind? Is he trying to trick us in some way?"

Sparkle shook her head. "Can't be. No point to it, right? They're still going forward. I mean yeah if they turned to leave, but this *Black Materia* isn't their goal. Their goal is killing Sephiroth."

"True. Keep your eyes open, something's going on."

"You too."

They had hardly stepped forward when Susan found herself looking a town, and the only others there, Cloud and Tifa, looked around in somewhat of a panic.

"Did we get teleported somehow?" asked Susan, coming up to both of them. "Or is this some weird feature of your world I should know about?"

"This is just a trick, ignore it!" said Cloud. "He's trying to distract us."

"What? None of this makes sense. Are we just standing there with drool coming out of our mouths? The others will notice and break us out of it."

"You're the magic expert, you tell me."

"Ah. Well, one thing I can tell you, even if we are he's not getting that *Materia* back. It's forever beyond his reach, unless he somehow mind controls me into opening my *Dimension* again."

"Is that likely?" asked Tifa.

Susan made a brushing off motion with her hand. "I have a ten RESolve. No way he's getting past that. Though I didn't get the REASON check against the illusion, or the RESolve

check to come under this spell...” Susan looked troubled.

“I hope you’re- Cloud, look!”

From the edge of town strode Sephiroth, and the three raised their weapons. Susan planted herself in his path, but he didn’t even seem to notice. Behind him were two men in Shinra uniforms, and a black haired dude Susan had never seen before, carrying a huge sword on his back.

Why doesn't he have that thing in his inventory? Showing off?

He apparently wanted to play chicken, and Susan leveled her blade as Sephiroth walked closer and closer.

The blade sank into his chest.

Betrayal from an unexpected quarter

Time: Just then

Place: Nibelheim illusion

“Poor little Susan,” said Sephiroth, looking down at her. “Can’t even tell what’s real anymore. Can’t you sense life energy or something now? Or at the very least the *Materia* I’m sure to be carrying.”

“How do you-” Susan realized how almost as soon as she asked it. “Never mind.”

“Quite.”

“End this charade, Sephiroth,” said Cloud, lowering his sword. “This serves no purpose.”

“No purpose?” he asked, as if shocked. “How little you understand.”

He vanished, along with the others.

Suddenly, the world went white, and Susan found herself standing with the others as the town burned. “Are we sure this isn’t happening right now?” she asked.

“This happened years ago,” replied Cloud. “Just ignore it. I was here during this time, he’s trying to make me think I wasn’t. That black haired guy you saw will probably be the one to come out of the- yup, there he is.”

The man did come running out of a nearby mansion, and jumped some flames towards them.

“Hey look, it’s my old master, Zangan! Whatever happened to that guy?”

“Don’t look at me.”

The man Tifa called Zangan checked a man standing there, then went into a burning house to look for survivors while the black haired man did the same.

Suddenly Sephiroth was back, and the two bantered back and forth about how Cloud wasn’t who he thought he was, and how he wasn’t here at all. Cloud said that if that was the case, how did he remember being here, then?

“In any case, let us out of this little fantasy, and face me! It’s time we ended this!”

“Cloud, you see us as enemies, but I see you as more of a brother. Did you not give me the *Black Materia* that day? Have you not asked yourself why you did that? Your heart knows the truth, that my path is the right one. That is why you aided me then, and why you shall aid me again.”

“Never!” he shouted.

He laughed. “Don’t be so sure. Hojo built you well, on that day five years ago. A little of this, and a little of that, and now here you stand. You’re like Susan there, in a way.”

“Hey, I was born, and I know who my mother and father were,” shot back Susan.

“Oh, allow me to be more clear. What I mean is, you both have a piece of me inside you. Directly, as part of my experimenting in your realm, Susan, and indirectly, through Janova, in the case of Cloud here. But you both hear my voice, and you have both done my bidding in the past.”

“Not by choice and never- what, what?” She looked over at Cloud. “You hear The Darkness as well?”

“No!” Cloud immediately refused, but Susan could see he was haunted... by the truth.

“You do, don’t you? I never even guessed. But you can fight his influence, I’ve done it. You don’t have to listen, and your choices can be your own.”

“Silly Susan, you really didn’t know? Ah, but you’re new to this traveling business, aren’t you? The veteran you would never have been so careless. Some who travel between worlds become so paranoid they can’t move without checking everything and everyone around them to make sure they aren’t from another reality. It’s quite amusing to watch. I wonder if you’ll one day become the same.”

“If it will help me track you down.”

He shook his head. “That’s just it. Will it?”

“Enough of this!” shouted Cloud. “I came here seeking you and I will kill you. That’s all that matters.”

"I'm just trying to spare you pain later on, brother. Come, I can prove it. Wasn't your picture taken when you arrived here? Or should I say, wasn't a picture taken? I've recreated this 'illusion' quite faithfully, and the man with the picture is right over there. Go ahead, see for yourself."

"I can't trust an imaginary picture inside this imaginary place."

"That's funny. You say that, but you have no trouble trusting an imaginary girl with your imaginary life."

"What do you mean, imaginary girl?" Susan demanded.

Oh no, is he going to tell her? thought Sparkle. I don't know if she's ready!

"Oh, didn't your father tell you? Certainly I don't want to ruin the surprise for you when you find out. Wander enough worlds, and you'll come see your reality as all the people of his realm do. I wonder if your father thought he was doing you a favor, not telling you directly?"

"Okay, now I'm starting to get annoyed with all this."

"Well, if you both choose to remain ignorant, that's your business."

"Yes, it is," put in Tifa. "So go away, Sephiroth."

"Go away? I thought you were all here to kill me, dear Tifa. Was that not the case? Here I am, back your words with action, if you can."

She lunged for him, but he was suddenly standing elsewhere.

Can he use Spirit Step or is he just part of the illusion?

"This is how you hope to match me? For shame."

"I should be in the picture," muttered Cloud, moving over to the man on the ground.

"Why would he change just that one detail?"

Did he forget about the changed detail about the other guy being here and not him?

"Cloud, don't!" said Tifa, but he reached down and pulled something out of the pocket of the man. There was Sephiroth, and Tifa, and the black haired guy Susan had seen running about.

"At least he's consistent. It's the same guy. Where did you pull this guy from, anyway?"

"I didn't pull him from anywhere," protested Sephiroth. "I am merely showing you the truth. We may seem to be at odds, but have I ever misled you, Cloud?"

"I know the truth. I came back to my hometown at sixteen, to help inspect the reactor. I wandered about the town, thinking about how little had changed in five years. We spent the night at the inn, and went up the reactor in the morning. I was excited, because that was my first mission since becoming SOLDIER first class." He paused, and Tifa looked almost in tears.

Wait, is there something else going on here? I don't have enough information!

"When did I get into SOLDIER? How did my training go? Who did I know that was also in SOLDIER?" Susan watched, concerned, as he started pacing and muttering to himself. Suddenly he clutched his head, and fell to his knees, screaming in pain. Susan took a step to rush to his side, but suddenly the scene changed again, and they were standing in a very odd place indeed.

Three other people were there. The scientist she thought she recognized from Aerith's house, on the tapes. He was the scientist who came in and started exclaiming over the data the two had left "for him." The second was a woman in a red dress, looking more like she was going to a dance than standing around some weird cave. The third was dressed in a white business suit, and had a no nonsense look about him. All were surprised to see the Cloud, Susan, and Tifa appear out of nowhere.

"Hey, where did you come from?" asked the woman. Cloud ignored her, holding something up as if to inspect it in the light.

"Oh no! That's impossible!" Susan yelled. "He's got the *Black Materia* back somehow. But I put it in my *Pocket Dimension*, nothing should be able to get at it but me."

"Ah, Susan," said Cloud, sounding odd. "Do you really believe me as small and limited as yourself? Do you feel you know all that I can do? All that is even possible to do? You know nothing."

"I know I'm taking that *Materia* back. *Retrieval!*" Even though she cast instantly and put extra energy in, Cloud simply waved a hand and her spell splintered and shattered. "What?"

“Learned that one from your father. Interesting backgrounds he has, along with that staff of his. Soon I’ll have all his secrets, and a greater understanding of these lower realms. That will allow me to better extract their energies, don’t you think?”

“I won’t just stand there and let you do this!” Susan pulled out her sword, but Cloud simply flicked a hand and she went sprawling. *I didn’t get a STRength check to remain standing? How is that possible?*

“Like there’s anything you can do now but watch. Ah, and I see Hojo is here as well. Thank you for all those clones you made, Hojo. Even this defective one. In return, let me show you something interesting.”

With that, Cloud rose into the air, shooting high above where there was some kind of cocoon held together by branches. As he got nearby the entire place started shaking, and the cocoon dropped a little, showing the figure inside. Susan tried *Transposition*, *Teleportal*, and *Elemental Burst: Knockout* in succession, but Cloud just gestured without even looking and shattered them all.

“What’s he doing to my magic?” she screamed at Sparkle.

“Too much to explain,” she said back. “I think we need to get out of here!”

“We have to stop him somehow!”

“Too late!” As she said this, Cloud stuck the dark orb into the cocoon, and it started to glow with a blackness like the very heart of space. Energy swirled around the form, and the ground beneath their feet began to crack and buckle as creatures Susan had glimpsed through the oddly transparent wall began to move, cracking out of the substance that held them. Rock began to fall from above, and Susan got to her feet and was almost knocked over again because of the shaking.

“Get to the Highwind, it’s the only hope!” shouted the man in the suit, and took off himself. The woman pulled off her heels and ran, and the scientist strolled out as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening. Tifa, calling for Cloud, had to be dragged away by Barret and the others, who had finally made their way to the place Susan had appeared. As a group they followed the man in the suit to some kind of floating ship and got aboard. Susan watched from the deck as they flew away, and her energy senses went wild as curtains of light shimmered around the crater they had just flown out of. She saw huge forms climbing or flying out of the hole as well, even one that dwarfed the size of the ship they were flying in. It didn’t seem to give them more than a passing glance as an aura of power rippled around it, and it flew off.

Finally the light show seemed to be over, and Susan could see, now far below, as a barrier of the type protecting the Ancient Dragon sprang up around the crater area.

Not getting back in there any time soon.

“Everyone all right?” asked the man in the suit.

“Tifa’s not,” said Barret, the unconscious form of the girl in his arms. “I don’t know if she hit her head or what, but she’s out of it.”

“Bring her inside, we need to be away from here.”

Susan gripped the railing of the deck, watching as the crater and the barrier fell behind them. *I failed. He splintered my magic, and said he learned it from my father. Does that mean he has my father captive somewhere, and is taking his backgrounds like Tom did mine? Or did he just study the technique because my father used it so much?*

“What did he mean?” she asked Sparkle, who was calmly washing herself.

“You mean *Counterspeller*? Yeah, don’t ask me how he got that particular background. Your father said he never knew another *Paragon* that had it, one of the reasons he was chosen to see Inari. He was unique in many ways, possibly even born to leave his homeworld as he did to save it.” She shook her head as if spraying water off of it.

“Basically, someone like that gets better and better at negating spells as they put points into it. Normally you have to cast the exact reverse, right? Well, a *Counterspeller* gets a +2 bonus at one *Background Point*, can use any spell of the same grade for two, or simply not cast a spell at all for three. At that point they just make a *Planet* check, and if they beat the casting roll... well, you saw.”

“The magic is negated instantly.”

"Pretty much."

"Seems he's getting better at countering me. Maybe countering all travelers like me, because I shouldn't think the multiverse revolves around me. That's going to be a problem."

"It could just be this place. Maybe there's other forms of magic here these people don't know about, but he can tap into."

"But it would take doing my kind of magic to negate my kind of magic. Did he learn that from his time inside Tom? And then once he figured out what my father was doing, did he use that knowledge to create the technique? I'm useless enough around here as it is, if he can negate my magic like that... I can't hit him with a sword, he probably has ten thousand HP or something bizarre like that!"

"We haven't tried an *Augment STRength* on you. I could put *Energetic Accumulation* on myself and get you a pretty high rating's worth. That might help."

"Yeah, we're going to have to do something, and with very little XP to work with, too. I thought this place might be nice, with Sephiroth gone. But now it's just gotten worse."

"Yeah, that trick with the *Pocket Dimension* troubles me most. Without pulling everything out, how do we know he didn't steal something else?"

"Wait, aren't I usually the downer? Besides, it was just camping stuff and such in there for the most part."

"I guess. Come on, let's get inside. It's too windy here."

"Yeah, okay."

Susan went inside, to find Barret shouting at someone he called "Rufus" about what should, or should not, be done next. Aerith was hiding behind Na, who was bristling at Hojo. The scientist was looking at them curiously.

"Everything all right here, Aerith? Na?" she asked, coming over to them. "Not that I can't say I'm pleased to see him, but he won't try anything at the moment, will you 'doctor?'"

"Oh, I'm famous, a girl I don't even know thinks she can intimidate me. How quaint."

"Let's just say I'm not adverse to tossing you over the side as an 'experiment' to see if you can grow some wings before you hit the ground."

"What did I ever do to you, young lady, to deserve such treatment?"

"You hounded and destroyed the lives of Aerith's parents, and then stole all her father's research. Naturally the first is the more terrible thing, in case you didn't know."

"Aerith? Oh, the specimens. I never learn a specimens' name, seems counterproductive when they'll all get dissected in the end."

"Go somewhere else. Now. Before I really lose my temper."

Hojo gave a dry laugh. "You're on an airship crawling with Shinra soldiers. What do you think one little girl is going to do?"

"What I always do in situations like that. Get creative."

"Bah. I have no interest in them as specimens anymore, anyway. It's a little late for that, don't you think? All my theories have been proven true, and there can be nothing greater for a scientist. You don't look intellectual enough to understand. Good day."

He walked away. *Shows what you know. I have an eight REASON and a seven KNOWledge. Both above average and probably just as high as yours.*

"You okay?" she asked.

"If I asked you to, would you kill him for me?" Aerith said with a surprising amount of hatred. "Just as a personal favor?"

"What if I just turned him into a frog instead?"

"No, *Toad* would wear off."

"I keep forgetting you guys have that 'spell.' No, I'm talking about a *Cursed Form*. He would be a frog forever. I think I also saw a spell, something about *Ultimate Justice*. It insures someone gets what they deserve in the end."

"I guess you weren't kidding about getting creative! And here I was just wishing he was dead. I guess I don't have much imagination."

Susan laughed. "Come on, I'll help you. Let's find a quiet place to sit and wait for whatever is going to happen next, and we can think of some horrible things to do to Hojo."

Aerith grinned. "Deal."

"There's one thing first," she said, looking around to make sure they were unobserved. The Shinra soldiers were at attention, watching them, but had no specific orders at the moment to detain them. (They couldn't go anywhere but down, and these people had no idea Susan could actually leap from this boat and then think about her *options* to survive hitting the ground. Including not hitting the ground, because she could fly.) "We know how things turn out now. We saved just before this. Let's rewind time and go back to that save. We must remember what happened, otherwise we would just repeat the same useless actions over and over. So let's go back and think of some other way to approach the problem!"

Aerith shook her head sadly. "We can't. When that barrier went up, access to that *Save Point* inside the crater became impossible. You might not be able to feel it because you haven't grown up around them, but I can. Right now we're not saved at all. It's a pretty scary feeling."

"What, it cut off access through time?" She nodded, and Susan rubbed her head. "Well that's just great. So none of you have a point in the past to go back to right now, is what you're telling me? You die and it's all over?"

"Yup. And it's an odd feeling, let me tell you. We'll have to be careful until we see another one."

"Yeah. Man, to think his control over this reality was so complete."

Sparkle spoke up. "Didn't you tell me he once said to you that different realities were more or less compatible with him? That's why he could suck your dad's dimension dry directly, but yours he tried to get through, well, you and Tom."

"He did say that, I'm sure of it. So maybe the next place I meet him in, outside this world, he won't be so super strong."

"It's a faint hope, but all we have right now."

"Wait, you're not leaving us, are you?" Aerith asked, alarmed.

"What? No, of course not. The people that sent me here wanted this world saved, and by my father's creepy humming, that's what I'm going to do. And I haven't seen the thing he talked about, that a low level spell of mine was the solution to. So it's not over yet."

Aerith looked relieved. "Oh, good."

"Keep quiet about what I can do, though. I don't think I want them knowing. To them I'm just another girl with some *Materia*."

"I'm not stupid, you know!"

"Sorry, I just thought it should be said."

"Guess I'll forgive you. This time."

The airship flew back to a port city in the south, and Tifa was transferred to a hospital there. The resistance fighters were not exactly under arrest, at the moment, and Susan wasn't wanted anyway like Barret and Tifa and Cloud were, but she had been found with them. So it was made clear they shouldn't go anywhere, and were given rooms with guards on the outside. Susan wasn't concerned, she could get everyone out in a jiffy should it become necessary.

In the hours that past she rested up, reading her book of magic to become more familiar with the new spells. She'd had the book all her life, so she had a pretty good idea about the old ones. But these new ones... like *Elemental Confinement*, which worked like *Immobilize* but damaged whatever it was holding as if the bonds were the element the spell was cast under. (So fire for Mars, burning them, and so on.) *What I need is massive amounts of damage, because these creatures here have so much more health than I'm used to. But I don't know how that's going to be possible.*

She had Sparkle cast the *Illusion* that she was just reading, and called up Silverstreak again.

The man(ish) himself answered.

"Susan, how goes the fight there?"

"Not well, actually. The Darkness overpowered me totally, just like you said. I didn't even get into combat with him, he just walked all over me."

“Ah, that’s the point though, isn’t it?” he said. “You have to follow the rules of the world, you know. Yes, sometimes things work out in your favor, because you kind of warp reality a little so you get resistance checks and such where natives wouldn’t. But of course you ‘offer’ them to others that you cast spells on, so it balances out. The point is, you weren’t in combat with him, so he could play with reality a little more than he could if you had been in the party and actively taken him on that way. He was sure to keep his distance from you, right?”

“He actually possessed Cloud, one of the people I was traveling with. I wouldn’t have attacked him in any case. It’s the others that get into combats, just by wandering around, I don’t know how to initiate one anyway.”

“Ah, clever. He is just as smart as Inari and myself, and we are, well, what we are. So keep that in mind, plus he has lots of time to plan things out. But he’s not unbeatable, you know that what am I telling you that for!? How else can I help?”

“XP. I don’t seem to be getting any. Or in reality I’m getting too much, slaughtering the local wildlife. Plus I don’t have MP so I can’t use Green *Materia*, and I hardly do any damage to anything when I hit it. How can I be effective here? You said a single spell could solve their issues!”

“And it will, have a little patience. Now, the XP thing. You’ll have to make do for now, maybe cannibalize some of your school skills? You are getting that XP, it’s just a little incompatible with you. That’s the trouble with visiting a place that’s somewhat, but not quite operating under your own physical laws. Now, you won’t walk away with thousands or even hundreds, but once you leave that place it’ll convert and you’ll get a bunch at once. So don’t think being there means you’ll miss out on improving yourself. You can stay here and train, we have teachers for just about everything. You have a high REASON right? You’ll burn through it in no time. Or if you want to make some stuff, we can provide a lab and such. Are you getting some good ideas?”

Susan shook her head. “I’m not sure. It’s been pretty non-stop around here since I got in. This is the first chance I’ve really had to sit and relax.”

“Give it some thought, you’re not done there yet. And don’t worry, I anticipated him getting the *Black Materia*, it’s what comes next that’s important. You’ll see. Don’t worry about combats too much, let your new friends handle that. Stay alive, raise *Materia* and offer support. You’ll be the key, don’t worry.”

“That makes me feel a little better. Thanks. Can I use *Materia* outside this world? The Yellow stuff, I mean. Or maybe Pink, like *Long Range*, letting me strike from a distance.”

“Sure. Not *Enemy Skill*, that takes MP. But the others, yeah. I don’t know how effective *Steal* would be though.”

“I’m talking about *Sense*, mostly.”

“Ah. Sure, as long as you use armor or weapons that have slots. You will have to spend some XP bonding it to yourself, just like an *Imbued* item. But not as much as the full *Imbuing*. We can talk about that when you get here. Oh yeah, your book can actually tell you how to *Fabricate* weapons or armor with slots! If you ask it to look into that and put something that has some on it overnight. The sword and armor will come with you, though, if you want to just bring them along. Never know how the knowledge might come in handy, though!”

“Good point. I’ll do that tonight.”

“As far as MP, can’t help you there. Your *Adaptive* skill is your *Limit Break*, in case you hadn’t realized it yet. You can use some *Materia*, anyone can, but the skill can’t give you MP. It’s a skill, and *Limit Break* is actually a skill for the people here. Unlike magic, that’s just sort of automatic.”

“I saw one of them, at least. But I have to get *hit* to activate it?”

“True. And you’re stuck at level 1 until you raise the skill. Could come in handy, but don’t stress over that either.”

“I just am usually more helpful than this! I’m feeling useless here, and having Darkness reach into my *Pocket Dimension* a little while ago didn’t help matters.”

“You will be. Believe me. Your time will come, I got excited about you showing up for a reason. Remember that. Now, new skills working out okay?”

“Oh yeah! *Spirit Sense* is amazing. I even found some *Materia* with it. I can’t wait to raise that and *Manipulation*.”

“Glad to hear it. Anything else for the moment?”

“Can my book analyze a save point?”

“Sure, just stick it inside. It can get you a similar spell.”

Susan thought a moment. “I guess that’s it.”

“Good timing. I think you’re about to have some visitors. Good luck!”

With that he vanished, and there was a knock on the door.

While Tifa Recovers

Time: Moments later

Place: Meeting room somewhere in Junon

Susan, upon hearing the knock at her door, knew it was probably not an invitation to dine, but rather the talk the man in the white suit said he wanted to have that day. She had been thinking about how she wanted to play things from here on out around the Shinra, and decided she didn't really want them knowing about her powers. Given how the others really seemed to hate the company, and her own experience watching Ifalna being carted away, she couldn't trust these people not to try and exploit her in every way possible.

That being decided upon, before she opened the door she cast a quick *Augment Skill: Acting* on herself, and allowed the soldier on the other side to escort her to the meeting room. Inside, only part of the team was seated, and none looked particularly happy. Cloud, of course, was missing, as was Tifa who must not have recovered yet. Oddly so was Yuffie, and Cait Sith was also absent. *Of course, if he works for the company like they said, he would be having his own meeting.* That left Aerith, Barret, Na, and Cid. Of course there were a smattering of soldiers, the woman in red, a fat guy dressed in green, and the president also seated around the table. *Wait, someone's missing.* "Where's Vincent?" she asked.

"As a former Turk, he's talking to Tseng and the others," said the guy in white. "Now that we're all here I'd like to get your side of the story. Barret, of course, is known to us, wanted for many acts of terrorism over the years. Aerith is a Cetra and so too valuable to just let go. Cid... probably would have cooperated with our earlier request for the Tiny Bronco, had we not been interrupted by you guys stealing it. Na is... whatever he is, and I may yet hand him over to Hojo. The only person I haven't seen before is you, my dear. What's your story?"

"Like, wow, am I really important enough to be questioned by the actual president of the Shinra Corporation? You are the president right? I mean it's so great to actually meet you!"

Rufus looked questioningly at her. "Really? I thought all you AVALANCH people hated me."

"Oh no! The Shinra Company has done, like, so much to improve our lives, how could I hate you? I mean I just couldn't believe some of the awful stories these guys were telling me. That's why I tagged along with them, you know, so that I could show them they had you all wrong, and stuff?" She lowered her voice. "And have you seen Barret's arms? Like oh my gourd!"

"Yes... yes I have. Who are you?"

"Oh, so stupid of me. My name is Susan, and I hope it's okay I brought my cat with me. I just can't stand to be apart from her, you know? If someone could put a litter box in my room for her, that would just be amazing. I would hate for her to have any accidents on your beautiful carpets. Like, were they really super expensive? I mean everything is just so gorgeous here!"

Now everyone was staring at her like she had lost her mind, and Susan could almost feel Rufus trying to make checks to pierce her 22 *Acting* check. *Good luck, suckers.* She almost ruined the effort by giggling, but her 18 *RESolve* check kept that under wraps.

Rufus started to say something a few times, but then turned to Barret. "Where did you find this girl?"

"Uh..."

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to admit it either. Really, is this your type?" He shook his head. "Anyway, it seems certain things have been kept from me, most notably from my chief scientist, so I want to hear your take on what's going on. Perhaps from that I can form a more complete picture."

So Barret and Aerith told him about how the planet was in peril, because Hojo had gone and put Jenova cells in people, turning them into Sephiroth clones. *Or as I like to call him, The Darkness.* They talked about his plans to basically become a god by absorbing all the energy of the *Lifestream*, by injuring the planet with a meteor strike. *Wait, a what strike?*

That's what the Black Materia does? Summons a space rock? I thought it would be something, I don't know, a little more immediate. And didn't they say that Materia was born from lifestream energy? Why would the planet create something... that could destroy the planet? They spoke of the land dying, due to draining the Mako out and turning it into electricity, and what harm the reactors did. He used this to explain his actions of blowing them up, and Rufus asked if he thought that would somehow stop Shinra from building more.

"I man has to have some dream," he replied.

"Quite. Go on."

They talked about how Aerith was going to release Holy, but that Susan saved her at the last second, thwarting Sephiroth from killing her and Aerith from committing "assisted suicide."

"Whoops!" said Susan, throwing up her hands.

With that, Rufus explained what Hojo had told him about this so called "reunion." Apparently, Hojo discovered that Jenova was basically immortal, and that any cell of hers that was removed would ultimately make its way back to the main body. That way it would come back to life.

Seems reasonable, after all you're not a creature from around here, are you? This version of you isn't you, just like the version of you in me isn't you. So you can reanimate the body as long as it's intact.

Very good, Susan. But Jenova actually had the ability to reanimate itself, I'm just borrowing it. And wonderful acting job, by the way. Good thing Hojo isn't here though, he actually spoke to you so he would be mighty confused right about now.

Bah, he wouldn't have seen through my Acting check either.

Whatever you say.

"So the question remains, what do we do with you all? Susan I'm inclined to let go, as she hasn't blown up any Shinra property that I know of. Cid and Vincent used to work for us, and are entitled to their opinions of us. As long as they don't go blowing stuff up, they can think well or ill of Shinra as they please. But you, Barret, and Tifa when she recovers... no, I don't think we can let you go."

"Didn't expect you would. What about Aerith?"

"I haven't decided on Na's, or her, fate. Hojo does have a claim on them, but he's not my favorite person at the moment."

"She's a human being!" he yelled, pounding the table. "Not some lab animal."

"She's a... person of interest," countered Rufus. "Can we really let the last Cetra wonder around out there? It's dangerous, even with Sephiroth now focused on the Northern Crater area. If she decides to try and summon Holy again, he might know and come after her."

"I won't," Aerith declared. "That was my one chance I think, and I've..." she glanced over at Susan, "been thinking maybe it wasn't the right choice after all."

"In any case, I'll have to ask you all to stay as our 'guests' until I figure out what to do with you all. Susan, if you wish to go back home, I'm sure we can drop you off now that the Highwind is finally functional."

"That is so nice of you to say!" she gushed in reply. "But if you want to know what to do with the others, I might have, like, you know, a suggestion?"

"Oh?" He raised an eyebrow. "Do tell."

"I couldn't help but notice those weird monster things that crawled out of that big hole in the ground back there? I can't help but wonder where they were all going? I mean I doubt they're out collecting flowers and bringing tea to their grandmothers, you know what I'm saying? These guys are professional monsters hunters, I guess? And I would sooooo hate if you had to send any of your precious solders out to get killed by them! So send these guys instead, you know? Maybe they could even, like, redeem themselves if they actually win."

"What an interesting idea. I suppose if they start attacking cites or something, we could find a use for them. I'll keep it in mind. For now, head back to your rooms, and I'll have some dinner sent up for you."

"Wow, just like in a fancy hotel!?! This trip is going to be soooo awesome, I can just tell

that right now. I'm so glad I tagged along with these guys, you know? Though I would be kind of sad if you decided to, you know, kill them?"

"Yes, I'm sure." He walked out of the room shaking his head, and the soldiers escorted the others back to theirs.

So far so good. Now to see what the others want to do and perhaps make a break for it.

Susan watched some TV, but the room had no computer access so she was kind of bored. She looked her character sheet over, focusing on what she could sacrifice to raise her new skills, and decided Silverstreak was right. She probably wasn't going to need *Herbology* or *History of Magic* ever again. For one thing the plants here were totally different (as Vincent hadn't known what an apple was) and knowing the history of magic on her world was not going to help her in, say, this one. Also Astronomy, Pistol (unless she got more ammo, it was useless. *Wait, have I ever seen Barret or Vincent actually reload?*) and Arithmancy.

It figures. Dozens of new spells I'm itching to try out, a handful of really cool skills, and I have all of 8 XP at the moment. Sure, I might get 50 when I leave this world, but that doesn't help me currently, does it?

Dinner came, and Susan found it to be excellent. She then popped the sword on top of her book, told it to figure out *Materia Slots* and went to sleep for a few hours.

She was woken by Sparkle, as agreed, and read over the *Dream Link* spell she had once used to contact Albus, and that Tom had used to talk to her. She had Sparkle cover the room in *Illusion* again, not for the first time cursing the light show her magic created. She figured the minor flash that the *Illusion* made was nothing compared to the ten minute pyrotechnic display she was about to commence, and wanted it covered up. Ten minutes later, Aerith and Barret appeared in her shared dream, the meeting room of the Starship Enterprise D. After a moment of disorientation, Barret looked across the table (from where she was sipping Tea, Earl Gray, Hot) and leaned closer to her.

"So is this reasonable, intelligent Susan or vapid, valley girl Susan?"

"Which one would you like, Barret? This is a dream, and I can be any kind of girl you want me to be." She batted her eyelashes, which was actually rather annoying, now that she had attempted it.

"I'll take the one that can actually get us out of here. Where are we, anyway?"

"A dream, like I said. Thought we could take some time to plan our next move."

"Oh, so you hadn't cracked under the strain. I did wonder."

"Be nice, Barret," chided Aerith. "She was throwing them off, and a good job she did too, I think. They don't think she's anything special now, and may be more lax at watching her. I think she did fine."

"Yeah, yeah. Cooped up all day in basically a cell. You call that fine?"

"It could have been a smaller, danker, more crowded cell, you know. We spent some time in one so we know they have them. Be glad you're here instead."

"And here we'll probably have to remain, at least until they slip up. Unless you want me just making some holes in the air. That won't be obvious something's up with me."

"No, I can handle it. I'm just worried about Tifa. Who knows what that so called scientist will do to her while she's out?"

"Could you wake her up?" asked Aerith.

Susan considered. "Again, risking them figuring out I have magic they don't know about. I can, or at least Sparkle can, she uses the spell to get me up every day because I'm such a heavy sleeper. But if she's in a coma, that could be pretty dangerous. The brain does that to heal itself. And again I have healing magic, better than yours, but the brain is pretty tricky. It won't cure a psychosis, if she gets one from me waking her up forcibly."

"Sounds like it's safest to wait, Barret. We'll give her some time, and Susan can always try her magic if we feel there's no other option."

"Yeah, all right. I guess we're all stuck here, then. I'm not leaving without her."

"We could leave though, and just bring her along afterwards. I know a spell to grab

someone and bring them to myself.”

“Cloud!?”

Susan shook her head. “I need to know roughly where they are, and doing too much magic in my room will draw suspicion. If he’s still at the crater, I might not get through that barrier. If he isn’t, I’d have to track him down, and that means even more magic. There’s always a chance someone will see through Sparkle’s *Illusions* I use to cover it. And I hate to be crass, but do you really believe he’s alive after all that? I mean that place crumbled, and he was right in the center of it.”

“I have to have hope. And I don’t hear his voice in the *Lifestream*.”

“You can do that? Huh. Okay, so he’s still alive. I guess he’s part Janova, so he won’t die easily.”

“Yeah, that was a shock. Old spiky hair handing the *Materia* over. Again. Can we ever trust him after this?”

“He has to learn to master the impulse to do what the Janova part of him wants to do. I have to have hope,” she inclined her head to Aerith, who nodded.

“I guess you’re right. If we are going to plan anything, shouldn’t we include Cid and Na?”

Susan shook her head. “No can do. While the majority of spells specify a number of targets based on rating, or allowing more targets while making the difficulty higher, this spell specifically says only two others can join. I guess maybe my brain is hosting all this, and more than two could just fry it? I’m not inclined to ask my book for a better version for that very reason.”

“Oh. Guess you’ll just have to tell them later.”

“If necessary. It takes ten minutes to cast, you know.”

“Ten? Okay, never mind. I guess we’ll just see what happens, and what they decide to do with us. But if they decide to off us or something, you better come through.”

“Of course.”

“And what was that whole ‘send them to fight those creatures’ all about, anyway?”

“How much easier would it be to escape in the confusion of fighting one of those things? Especially if you’re outside to do it? Plus I’ve seen you guys fight, you can take it, right?”

“I guess we’ll have no choice if they send us out there. Escape plan, huh? Actually seems logical. That whole act of yours had me worried.”

“And them fooled, I hope. Anything else?”

The other two shook their heads.

“Wait, there was one other question I had. Silly me- where do you buy ammo from? I have a gun but only about 50 shots. Vincent seems to just keep shooting without worrying about it, but even he must run out of bullets sometime. I was wondering, as you guys had guns, maybe I could show you the type of ammo it uses and you might have something- what?” Barret was looking at her like she was going crazy, again.

“What do you mean, bullets?”

“What do you mean, what do I mean, bullets? You know, the things that come out of the gun to actually do the wounding? Hot lead? Shoot ‘em up, shoot ‘em up, pow, pow?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. Guns cause damage same as swords do, they don’t shoot anything out. I mean swords aren’t shooting stuff out to cause damage, are they?” He laughed. “You pull the trigger, and something gets damaged. Easy as that.”

“Right, forgot where I was. Never mind.”

The next day, she read a new chapter about *Slots* and her suspicions were confirmed. There was nothing keeping manufacturers from linking all the slots together, it was just an increase in DIFficulty. At least the way she made things, as it could be different for them. They had to be prepared, and each linked slot added 10 to the DIF of doing the *Fabrication*. In her terms, each slot also cost 5 XP, in addition to the XP cost of increasing the TR of the weapon, should she wish to do so. But it did inform her that even non-*Materia* things slotted in would act like *Materia* if properly prepared. It didn’t take any more time or XP to *Imbue* the spheres that would fit, it was just a matter of preparing them properly. In this way, she could hook her

own Elemental spells to something like *HP Absorb* and actually get some benefit. The spell would have to be cast from the *Imbued* object, so she wouldn't be able to put more energy into it, but conversely it wouldn't cost any energy to cast. (If done as 50 charges, as usual.) She could also hook up any number to that linkage, rather than needing a bunch of separate copies of *HP Absorb*, as in the example given. So unlike Vincent needing eight copies of *Lightning Materia* to do what he did, she could do it with only 2. (One in her weapon and one in her armor, if she had enough *Blue Materia* to make it worthwhile.)

All in all, a very long term project. I could probably make a sword with Creation, with the slots put in as the book recommends. They're just holes in the design, basically, until the Fabrication is done on them. Then a bunch of XP and time to make that happen. Then more XP and time making spheres that are Imbued with anything useful. I think I'll just stick to premade stuff for now.

That completed, she turned on the news and was shocked to see a live report, covering one of those creatures lumbering towards a town. Shinra forces were in pursuit and seemed to be throwing everything they had at it. If this was making a difference or not, she couldn't tell.

Maybe they shouldn't go up against it, after all...

Making Deals

Time: About ten minutes later

Place: Susan's room in Junon

There was an unexpected knock at the door, and Susan opened it to find President Rufus standing there.

"May I come in?" he asked, looking around the room.

"Of course!" she said, wishing now she had put *Augment Skill* back on. Of course, she hadn't expected the president of the company to come to her.

"You've seen the news then," he said, referring to the ongoing coverage of the Weapon attacks.

"Oh, it's just terrible, all those people who must be so afraid. Do you think you can stop it? Please, have a seat!" They both sat at the small table that was set to one side.

"I do hope so, but I'm not here to talk about that."

"Really?" She put a hand on his arm. "Well it's just you and me, Mr. President. Whatever you want to talk about... or do you want to talk at all?"

He threw back his head and laughed, finally getting under control again. "No, you were much more convincing yesterday. Anyway, the report said you got more flustered around girls than guys, so personally I don't think you have any real interest in me... or Barret for that matter."

"Cait Sith."

"Yes. His report on you was quite through. Though I will admit he was reluctant to provide it. You must have made an impression on him. That, or he's scared stiff of you."

"And here you are. Pretty brave."

"I know you're not all that great a fighter. I'm pretty sure I could take you before you could kill me. After all, I fought Cloud and by all reports he does far more damage than you do. Besides, I saved before I came in here. Things go bad I just pop back, knowing whatever it was we discussed and I'll try a different tactic. You, on the other hand, won't remember me coming in, so I'll have the advantage."

"How do I know this isn't your second time around?"

"I wonder..." He said no more, just looked at her with a slight smile.

"Really have to analyze what those things are and get me that spell," muttered Susan.

"So, once a spy, always a spy told you all about me, huh? In that case, what do you want?"

"Why, your help, of course. That's why you came to this world, isn't it? He indicated that you knew more about what we're actually facing, and right now I need all the help I can get."

"I suppose I'm duty bound to assist you."

He sighed and looked away. "Look, I won't say my employees are angels. Far from it. But most of this mess was caused by my father. I've only taken the company over recently. Give me a chance to atone for our mistakes. Yes, before I thought to control the world through fear, and why not? I figured I could get away with it. But these Weapon things, and *Lifestream* and Reunion- they're all bigger than me. And apparently you've dealt with similar things, so help us, now. Please."

Susan snorted. "Even that sounded more like a demand than an actual request. But fine, I'll help you, with some conditions. We're all on the same side now, so my friends walk."

"I don't know if I can do that. The political situation, which I admit, we created, doesn't lend itself to us backtracking on this. They, AVALANCH, are the enemy, that's what we've been telling people for years. To suddenly say 'whoops, they were right all along' would turn public opinion against us. We need to stay at the front of people's minds as defenders and saviors. Otherwise we won't get the support we need to protect people."

Susan could see his point. If confidence in Shinra fell, and Weapon started attacking someplace, Shinra would show up. If they were too busy doing crowd control because no one wanted to follow their orders, and not enough time shooting Weapon, it could lead to more deaths. "Well then, you're just going to have to stage an escape. Allow us an out we can exploit and I'll handle the rest. Once they're out of your custody you can get it touch with me about what you want done, and I'll tell you if it's possible or not."

"I'll think about how we can accomplish that. I know at least one thing we want to do is, the agent said you used it all the time. Those holes in the air to go from one place to another."

Susan shook her head. "I have to see a place at least once to set the other end. I haven't seen enough of this world to actually help you."

"But you have seen the place we need one. The crater." He slid a picture of the energy barrier over to Susan, and she looked it over. "We need to bring that down so we can take Sephiroth out. Can you do it?"

"Alone? Maybe, but it would leave me helpless afterwards. It seems this one may be slightly more impenetrable than the last one I saw. This one cut off access to the *Save Point* that was inside, used before it came up. I'm not sure my magic could get under it, which is where the explosion that took it out was placed last time."

"What about shooting it with a giant gun, that was powered by Mako?"

"That's tough to say. It was recently explained to me that your guns just sort of cause damage, rather than needing to be reloaded. I guess if you could cause enough damage to it that way... but how are you going to get it near enough to- oh."

"Exactly. We would install the gun in Midgar, where we have the most reactors. You put your hole right at the end of the barrel. That way it loses no energy on the trip over there, for maximum impact."

"So basically the equivalent of smashing hundreds of Green *Materia* into the barrier, all at once."

"You could think of it that way, yes."

"Fine. My friends get away, Aerith stops being hounded, and you have a deal."

"How can we contact you?"

"You must have some pretty powerful transmitters. That toy cat of yours picked up a signal from somewhere. Give me something similar and call me on it."

"Seems reasonable. Now, about our other little problem?"

"Your image? Can't do anything about that. Maybe a dash of color, have you considered a red handkerchief in one pocket?"

"I'm talking about *Meteor*." He set another photo down on the table, this one a grainy image of a rock. "That's the one we think is heading towards the planet. The one that will destroy us."

"What, you want to *Teleportal* over to it, fit some explosives on it and blow it away?"

"Wait, is that possible?"

"Ah, maybe? I've gone to places I've only seen in pictures, of course. But this is a little different. Wait a second." Susan lapsed into silence. "Sparkle, come look at this."

Rufus didn't seem surprised when Sparkle jumped up to look at the picture. "Seems pretty small from this distance."

"Do you think this is what the people that sent me here were talking about? Is this the problem I can easily solve?"

"Sure, if these people had energy you could drain, getting you a high enough rating to reach it with magic."

"He said a simple spell. Do you think he wanted me to go back to the previous world, gather energy there like I did, and then come back? That's not really that simple though. Give me a few minutes, let me review the spells I know," she said to Rufus.

"Please, take your time," he replied, putting his hands behind his head and tipping back in his chair.

Susan started paging through her book, looking for something specific. "Interesting," she said after a few moments. "Do you know how many *Sight* based spells there are?"

"Not many."

"No, not many. Less than 25. Oddly, my *Legion* is sight based, so I could pop them into a news broadcast somewhere. They would just stand there, because they would have no orders, but still. No, get this- *Thrust* has a range of *Sight*."

"You're kidding!"

"No," said Susan, beginning to laugh. "Look for yourself. It's actually *Sight*." She fell into waves of laughter, and Rufus looked on, confused. "Oh, sorry," she said, wiping her eyes. "Look, I'll demonstrate." She turned on the TV. "Is this live? Yes, I see it says it is. Now, what

to pick... ah!" Susan picked something in the background, and cast *Thrust* on it before the camera panned away. She didn't put any extra energy in, the DIF was only 7, rather than being based on the distance. The trash can went flying, unnoticed by the news reporter but visible to anyone at home. She started laughing again. "Oh man, to see the looks on their faces!"

"What? What did you just do? What's so funny?"

Susan got control of herself back. "It's just so weird to have it be *Sight* based. Like I said, most spells aren't. You have to be pretty close to them in order to have it work. Not so much this one. Look, *Thrust* does one thing. You saw, it makes whatever I cast it on fly away from me violently. And I can do it on anything *I can see*. Now I could look through a telescope or something and cast the spell on this chunk of rock heading our way. The spell reads "The target is thrown away from you as many meters as your Mercury rating." And that's it. It doesn't specify what happens if the target is moving towards you, or away or anything. You cast, boom, it gets pushed away, seemingly without regards to the object's initial momentum or velocity or anything. Now, where is the object?"

"Space?"

"Space, exactly. So I cast it on the rock and the rock, having no other choice, is magically thrown from its original position to X meters away, directly opposite where I am. Where X is the rating in my skill, which can be as high as about 80. So it goes 80 meters away from me in less than a second, making its speed pretty high. In space, there's nothing to stop it from going that way, and it continues away from the planet, forever."

"And that would work?"

"As long as Sephiroth isn't around anymore, sure. It would be his will against mine, and even if I won, he would just rope it in again and it would start getting closer. And by then I would be exhausted and unable to try again. So you get rid of Sephiroth, and I'll get rid of your Meteor problem. The thing that threatens your entire world. *With a grade 2 spell.*" She started to giggle again.

"You'll have to forgive her," explained Sparkle." She's been worrying about that ever since we got here. It's sort a relief to know we figured it out."

"Yes, I can see that. Very well. It's going to take weeks to get the canon moved from Junon to Midgar. Especially with that Weapon thing roaming around making life difficult. We'll need to be sure it's somewhere far away when we begin the transport process. Don't want it destroying the thing, after all. Just the engineering work alone to figure out how to decouple the canon and transport it will take our experts days. We may have to do it in pieces... unless you can just snap your fingers and do it?"

Susan shook her head. "Anything on the scale you're talking about? Way too much for my magic to deal with. Sorry. Though *technically*, I suppose if you could break it into pieces, I could *Shrink* them down. If I had seen Midgar before I could walk them through a *Teleportal* and then bring that back to full size."

"I'll keep that in mind. I think it's more detaching it and hooking it up to the reactors, rather than the transport process that is the issue. But I'll see what my engineers say." He stood up, and Susan got up as well. "I'll give you details about the breakout when I can. Naturally you shouldn't tell your friends, their reactions should be as genuine as possible."

"But once this is over, the truth gets out, right?"

He sighed. "One way or the other, we at Shinra have some atoning to do."

"Long as you realize it."

"You'll have to stay here, of course, much as I would like to involve you in this. Having you running around the town might raise some questions. At least among the staff here."

"Just tell them I'm your new mistress."

"Now I think it's my turn to laugh. Good day."

"One second."

"Yes?"

"I want any cameras in this room removed."

"Cameras, in these rooms?" He acted shocked. "I don't know what you mean."

"Trust has to come from somewhere, President. Let it begin with you."

"I suppose your magic can tell you if I've done so or not?"

“Believe that it can. Believe how angry I’ll be if you say you will, and you don’t. I could find them, but it would be tedious. I would rather just know they were off.”

“As a matter of interest, what would you do if you decided you didn’t want to be here anymore?”

Susan shrugged. “Leave, of course. Even without my *Teleportal*, I could walk out that door at any time. Sparkle, a demonstration?” Susan held her arms out. “Please, touch me in the morning, and then just walk away.”

“*Phase.*”

He seemed confused, but passed his hand through her arm, then body and head. Satisfied, she nodded to Sparkle who dropped the spell again. “You really could have left at any time.”

Susan nodded.

“Thank you... for the chance to prove myself to you.” He left.

“And now,” Susan announced once he was gone, “we’re out of here.”

“Are you not helping them?”

“Oh sure, I didn’t say I wouldn’t be back. I just want to see this town, and once the cameras are off, we can slip out for a bit. We’ll wait until just after lunch, then go see the sights. We can just *Teleportal* back here before dinner, and they won’t be the wiser.”

“I suppose. How will you know when and if he keeps his word?”

“Good *Question* my faithful companion. Good *Question*. We’ll check every hour.”

It only took the first hour for the *Question* spell to report a “yes” to the question of “have the cameras in this room been disabled” so Susan, *Invisible* and *Phased*, passed out of the room and into the hall a little after lunchtime. She debated checking on her friends, but gave the president the benefit of the doubt. *After all, it’s the same for me either way. If he posts only a few guards and lets us go without too much of a fight, fine. If he doesn’t, well, sucks to be him. I’m still Susan Extraordinaire.*

But she did go check on Tifa, who was hooked to several monitors and fluids in a hospital bay on a different floor of the building they were in. She looked a bit gaunt, and Susan wondered about trying to get into her dreams with *Dream Link*.

But she’s obviously in some kind of coma. She’s not really asleep, as far as the spell goes. I don’t know. Maybe in a day or two, see what’s bouncing around in there. At least she is being treated. Wake up soon, Tifa.

And so Susan went exploring. Having no real destination in mind, she couldn’t get lost, so she just wandered the streets of Junon mostly at random. She found several shops, but the stuff they were selling didn’t seem as good as the stuff she already had. She did buy a few things she knew the party was low on, like *Potions* and some *Antidote*, but even paying for things herself she wasn’t quite sure how she managed it. *Gil* just seemed to transfer between inventories without really being visible. She debated buying another copy of *Sense* to stick in her sub-space pocket, but thought maybe this one would reproduce itself by the time she was done, and decided against it.

One thing she got excited about was the small inn she found, as there was a save point next to the counter. She had no idea how to use the thing herself, the others just seemed to touch it, but nothing really happened when she did so. *So am I saved or not? How could I tell? In either case, I have something better anyway, a way to take it with me.*

The bored looking man behind the counter looked at her like she had just landed in a spaceship when she asked about leaving her book there overnight. He guessed it was fine, though he couldn’t imagine why she would want to do such a thing. She did another quick *Question* to make sure the book would be undisturbed, and got back a “yes.”

“There’s a thousand *Gil* in it for you if I come back and find this book undisturbed, got it?” asked Susan.

“Sure.”

“Do you have a piece of paper?”

He got her one, and she chuckled as she put a *Spell Symbol* on it. She further put her spell of *Somnolent Smog* into it, and then set the paper at an angle atop the book. The gems on the book were already glowing, so the analyzing circuits were hard at work.

"See you tomorrow!" she said lightly, skipping out.

"How are you going to pick the book up?" Sparke asked.

"*Hygiene* will erase the writing, right?"

"I guess it will."

That done, it reminded her that she had been slacking off on making *Spell Symbol* papers, and went back to her room early to work on that. She had tons of paper in her *Pocket Dimension* so she found some scissors, cut it into appropriately sized pieces, and started making some.

She worked about two hours on that, *Spell Symbol* taking only a minute and a half (she took the extra time for all this) to cast and any other spell taking much less time. So she made 30 of them, and stuck them, in groups, into her *Dimension*.

The next day, Susan was pleased to see a new spell in her book, the grade 10 spell of *Time Anchor*. Basically you cast it, maintained it (of course, hello new *Spell Symbol*) and at any point before it went away you could return to the point in time you cast it from. Others could also recall what had happened, up to one per Saturn rating. Of course it took 10 minutes to cast, (20 from writings) but she didn't mind. She was just going to read the spell over, make a bunch into *Spell Symbols* and then replace them as they were used.

"I could see that coming in very handy," remarked Sparkle, reading the spell symbology over. "You basically create a short lived, parallel universe, and if you don't like how it turns out, you get to go back and change it."

"Exactly. Something these people take for granted, now available for me, and portable. I do so love my magic, and thank you Silverstreak for the sensors that made it possible."

So Susan got an eighteen on her *Magical Scripture* and an eleven on her *Magical Theory*, so she read it but didn't quite get it yet. She had breakfast, watched some TV, and tried again with a seventeen, and she knew she had it. She had time aplenty, so she made five of them over the course of the day, taking a full half an hour for each. (As she could extend the casting time by 50%, and 50% of 20 minutes was an additional 10 minutes.) That gave her a guaranteed sixteen, beating the difficulty by one.

I do not want to know what would happen if I backfired this spell!

Then she got bored again, took a nap to get some energy back, and wondered what other trouble she could get into around here. It had only been three days, and she needed six to raise her newest skill group, so that was out. So basically she puttered around, made *Symbol* papers, and watched some TV. The president didn't come see her again, and after a few more days she was starting to really worry about Tifa and wonder if she shouldn't go try waking her up.

I could do a 30 minute casting of Time Anchor the normal way. If she seems wrong somehow, just rewind time again. But how can I know she won't have complications later?

She shouldn't have worried. A full week after they had been pulled out of the crater, Tifa woke up to her new captivity.

And public execution.

Forecast: Cloudy days ahead?

Time: Seven days after the escape from the crater

Place: The march to the gas chamber for our heroes Tifa and Barret

The president had come one last time, after Tifa woke up, about their escape plan.

“Cait Sith will be going with you. He’ll take you to the airfield where the Highwind has been prepped for your departure. Follow him out and you’ll be fine.”

“You’re giving us that airship?”

“Like you said, trust has to come from somewhere. Cait Sith saw what you could do, and so did I. Plus I got reports of a girl that looked an awful lot like you wandering around town. Yet you always came back, so I think you really do want to do what’s best for the planet, despite our bad reputation.”

“Maybe the food’s better here.”

He smiled. “If what you say is true, and I have no reason to believe it isn’t, you may be the only hope for our world. Plus, you said you needed to see a place to go back to it, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Best way to do that is aboard that ship. Now these two are going to be marching to what they think is their doom. The guard will be light, so I don’t want a lot of soldiers getting killed here, okay?”

“As long as they aren’t random encounters, I’ll disable them before they can actually fight us. That spell should still work.” *I hope.*

“Fine.”

“What about Aerith and the others?”

“They’ve already been snuck aboard.”

“Excellent.” Susan had the foresight, before this meeting, to put *Detect Lies* on herself, so she knew Rufus was telling the truth. “Then let the show begin!”

Susan was walking, *Invisible* to anyone, alongside the two that had been tied up. They believed that they were walking to a gas chamber, where they would be killed while the public watched.

Would so gruesome a display have actually been planned if they were really going to be killed? I wonder. Susan was going to see what the situation was by the chamber, then possibly wait until one person had been led inside. She would then switch them with someone else, if the door had a window she could look through. If it didn’t, she would simply take out any guards that were there with *Immobilize*, before the door could be closed. She was *Accelerated* for this very purpose, to get the bonus to her *Mercury* check. Of course, if she could get them all with one casting of *Hypnotic Field*, so much the better. *But the less showy here the better, Susan. Remember that.*

Inside the gas chamber room there were only two guards, plus the woman in the red dress, who seemed to be wearing it again. *Odd, she has a good job, you would think she could afford at least one other dress. Or maybe she alternates? Did I catch her on ‘red dress day’ both times? Focus, Susan!*

Apart from that there was a man with a camera, a couple of people sitting on metal chairs, and that was it. Oh, and the very poorly disguised form of Cait Sith, holding a microphone and looking weird. *Kind of spread out.*

She quickly ran to the other door in the room, and yes, it was the chamber and yes, it had a window set in it. *Though I guess it doesn’t matter, the spell doesn’t specify I have to be looking at either target. Just that I have to be within M range of it. Huh.* The woman in red decided that Tifa would go first, and shoved her into the chamber. They sat her down and tied her arms to the chair, while the lady in red called Tifa some... less than polite things.

With that done, she and the guard left the room, closing the door behind them. She announced the execution was about to begin when suddenly alarms rang out through the complex that *Weapon* was attacking!

Hey, he doesn’t mess around. I didn’t think he was going to make it this easy for me.

She shrugged, and started casting. The woman was still very near the door as the people in the chairs jumped up, frightened by the sudden siren. Some soldiers all took off running, probably to their duty posts in a situation like this. The two holding Barret looked at each other, but didn't move.

"What's this?" asked the lady in red, looking at the swirling magic around her.
"Your death," Susan couldn't help but say, completing the spell. "*Transposition.*"

Of course the universe chose that moment to make her check the worst possible, while Scarlet's check was almost the best possible. Susan couldn't have that, so she spent 1 XP to succeed, having gotten an *XP Bonus* card before this began. Tifa and Scarlet switched places.

Honestly, it was my own fault. I should have put extra energy in. Two more would have done it. Oh well.

"What?" exclaimed Tifa. The guards raised their guns, as Susan suddenly became visible.

Let it not be said I don't learn from my mistakes. "Immobilize!" she cast on the two of them, using 6 energy this time. Both failed their checks to break free, and Susan realized these people couldn't actually spend energy on stats like she could. Because you can't spend what you don't have! (Credit cards notwithstanding) *And that woman in red rolled that high regardless? Figures.*

"What's going on?" asked Barret, as the two struggled to escape their bonds they suddenly found wrapped around them.

"We're getting out of here, is what's going on," she replied, running over to him. She drew her *Alleviation* knife and cut his ropes, not having to worry about cutting him with it. Soon he was free and Cait Sith ran over to them.

"Come on, the Highwind is waiting!" he said, struggling out of his odd disguise.

"You all planned this?" asked Tifa, eyes wide.

"No time to talk, let's go!" Susan and the others made for the door, but Susan stopped as she got there. "*Somnolent Smog,*" she cast on the middle of the room, causing the two soldiers to fall asleep. She released their bonds.

"Now they won't remember what you guys said, and I don't have to maintain the *Immobilize*. Come on!" *At least, I hope it works for them like it does for me.* Suddenly she had a thought. *I hope that wasn't real poison gas they were using. I would hate to have just killed that woman by accident.*

Tifa saw her looking back at the room.

"The guard dropped the key, I was just reaching for it with my foot when I got switched for her. She'll get it and be fine."

"Oh, okay."

Even as they stepped out of the room, they all heard the sound of the cannon firing, and smaller guns opened up as well.

"Wait, *Weapon* is actually attacking?" Susan shrieked. "I thought it was just a trick to lure the soldiers away!"

"I guess not. Come on," said Cait Sith, "airfield is this way." He took off as best he could with those huge feet of his, and the others followed. They ran outside Junon, where Susan could see *Weapon* rising out of the sea. It smashed into the place, and Susan almost fell over, but was steadied by Barret.

"Are those guns even doing anything to it?" she asked, looking up at them. "Because they don't seem to be."

"Worry about that later," said Barret, pushing Susan forward. "Let's just go if we're going."

Suddenly a reporter ran up to them. "Can you comment on this whole situation happening right now?"

"Yeah, it's bad news. Out of the way!"

"Don't get so upset. It's me! Yuffie!"

"Where've you been all this time?" demanded Susan.

"Hiding out. Not going to see the number one ninja from Wutai get captured, no sir. Glad to see you escaped. I was beginning to get worried."

"Yeah, about time, huh Susan?" Barret growled. "So much for our magical girl."

"I'll explain later. Come on!"

They ran away from the scene of the battle, leaving *Weapon* to be shot point blank by the main cannon, and got away clean.

"Someone want to explain to me what's going on?" Barret demanded, once in the air and away from Junon.

"Sure," said Susan, looking around the ship. "This place have somewhere we can sit down?"

"War room over there," replied Cid, pointing.

"Let's go there. By the way, who's flying this thing?"

"Some people loyal to me, don't you worry."

"Okay."

They all sat, with Susan at the head of the table. "Basically, the president offered me a deal. *Someone* who shall remain nameless told them about me, so he knew what I can do. He wants to take the barrier down, and asked me to provide him a *Teleportal* to get the cannon blast a bit closer to the barrier for maximum effect. I told him fine, but my friends walk. He held up his end of the bargain, and threw in the Highwind to boot. Clear?"

"You saying president Shinra himself let us go?"

"Why do you think there were so few guards? He didn't want his people being killed, and I agreed. Seems like enough are getting killed by *Weapon* already, they don't need our help."

"But why?" asked Tifa. "We're terrorists!"

"You were. Now you're the only people with the strength and knowledge of what's really going on that might have a chance to actually do something about it. He's not stupid, he sees the signs. Maybe it's only self-preservation, but you saw *Weapon*. You saw the news reports, right? Wherever that creature goes, Shinra is there to beat it back from populated areas. That's raising public opinion to an all-time high. People are scared. I mean look at that hunk of rock in the sky!" She pointed, but they were all inside and couldn't see it. "Every day it gets a little closer. People need hope right now."

"And you guys are capable," agreed Cait Sith. "I've seen that again and again in my travels. I mean you have Yuffie."

"What? Me? I mean, yeah, that's right."

Everyone laughed a bit.

"Okay, I guess it makes sense. So, do we technically work for Shinra now? Dang, that's not going down easy."

"Hey, technically we stole this airship. It's ours now. They won't be coming after it, at least until the planet is safe. We're still outlaws, just... outlaws they don't chase around any more. At least as long as you guys don't do anything dumb, like blow up more reactors."

"Nah, I can see that won't work, long term. Shinra has to change from the inside. Maybe this is the start. You believed the president?" he asked Susan.

She nodded. "Especially at the end, when I had anti-lying magic going. He told me the truth in what he was saying."

"Guess I'll put my trust in you."

"Thanks, Barret. The question now becomes, what's our next step?"

Everyone looked around.

"If Cloud were here, he would know."

"And there it is," said Susan, popping her book out. "Let's find out if Cloud is still alive, and if so, where he is."

"You can tell?"

"My magic might be able to. Only takes a few minutes, let's ask."

So Susan cast *Question* from writing, and got back a “yes” answer to the question “Does Cloud still live.” Everyone seemed glad of that. She then asked a second question, which was a little bit more unclear. “Where is Cloud currently?”

“*Lifestream*.”

“Oh great, he’s physically in the *Lifestream*? What’s that going to do to him?”

Everyone shook their heads. “I don’t think tests have even been done, immersing someone in pure *Lifestream* energy,” said Cid. “It’s too hard to capture and control. It goes into reactors, yes, but unless processed rapidly, it sort of evaporates when cut off from the main stream.”

“Sorry I can’t narrow it down a little more,” apologized Susan. “But he’s alive, and that’s the important thing. Perhaps he’ll wash up somewhere, and if we keep checking, we’ll snag his location soon.”

“I hope so. What do we do in the meantime?”

“Level up?” suggested Cid.

“*Materia* hunt!” suggested Yuffie.

“Hunt for Huge *Materia*?” suggested Cait Sith.

“Okay, that’s two votes for *Materia*,” said Susan. “And I’ll admit the stuff is useful, but can’t you just buy the stuff in shops? And what’s Huge *Materia*?”

“Ho, ho, ho!” said Yuffie. “You think the stuff in shops is the be all and end all of the *Materia* line? No, sir. When you’re a *Materia* hunter like me, you hear rumors. Like people going to remote locations and finding some special stuff that never gets out of their hands. I’m talking premium stuff, here, like you’ve never seen. But this Huge *Materia* interests me as well.”

“It should. It’s something Shinra has been working on making for some time. Given that you guys need all the help you can get, my boss has given me permission to let you know where they are. You’ll have to steal it, I guess, but that’s better than nothing?”

“We get made into the bad guys again? Why?” demanded Barret.

“Yeah, it doesn’t do them any good to look foolish as we steal stuff out from under them.”

“No, no, you don’t get it. It’s top secret stuff. Even those that transport it don’t know what they’re transporting. We would be stealing a black box, basically, and it wouldn’t be publicized that it was missing. It’s not supposed to exist, you see.”

“He really is giving us all the tools he can, isn’t he?” remarked Susan.

“Hey, it’s our world too. Just let us know when you want to make a move against it, and we’ll get it ready for transport. That’ll be your cue to get in there and swipe it. There’s four in total, so it’ll take a while to get them all under our control.”

“Okay. Any other suggestions?”

“When did this become a democracy? We need a leader!” said Barret.

“Whatever,” replied Susan. “If there’s something important someone needs to do, I’m giving them a chance to speak up. I want to explore this world more, so I can open *Teleports* to more locations. If that coincides with hunting *Materia*, large or small, I’m up for it. Of course I want that training Yuffie promised me, and finding better weapons might not be amiss. Aerith, you’re pretty quiet, what do you want to do?”

“Find Cloud, but we can’t yet. Apart from that, *Materia* is power for us. With how powerful Sephiroth is just by himself, I don’t think we can ignore any avenue that helps us beat him. Getting stronger and finding *Materia*, that’s my vote.”

“Woo hoo, you’re the best, Aerith!” gushed Yuffie.

“Any other votes?”

“Weapons are good,” said Vincent. “Killing monsters to raise our *Limit Break* level. Getting stronger. I don’t see anything wrong with that. According to what I was told, we’re kind of on hold until that barrier is down, right? And the barrier won’t come down until the cannon is moved. I heard weeks, at best.”

“That’s what I heard. I just hope that meteor isn’t traveling very fast, and takes a few months to get here. Luckily space is pretty big, so that shouldn’t be too much of a concern.”

"From what I've observed," spoke up Sparkle, "great events in the world tend to happen when dramatically appropriate. Consider our recent escape. That *Weapon* could have attacked that city at any time in the last week. But the day Tifa wakes up and the plan to get us out of there goes off, that's when it decides is the best time? Really? And us arriving just in the nick of time to save Aerith? Us running into Hiraga in the last world, just as we both transited? I don't think we have to worry. Meteor will fall, but only as fast as it needs to in order to give us time to prepare and take action against it. Mark my words. I even have a name for the phenomenon that I made up: *Narrative's Imperative*."

The others looked at her, then back at Susan.

"Catchy. Technically, she's been traveling worlds longer than I have. If she's noticed something like that, it's probably true. I'll have to keep an eye out for that."

"Somehow that statement just seems so wrong on so many levels. Yet I find I can't think of a good counter example. Anyway, is it possible to do all this stuff at once? Is there a place we can go to get stronger and search for *Materia*?"

"Why would we have to do all this as a group? We can drop some people off in a good area to slaughter monsters, while us *Materia* hunters scour the world."

"What? Break up the party? Madness!" said Vincent.

"It won't work?"

"No, it's so crazy it just might work. Only three can participate in combat, and we have just about enough members for three groups. There must be a map around here someplace, let's look for an area with some high XP creatures to kill, and anyone who wants to get stronger can come with me."

"I'm going with Vincent!" said Aerith immediately.

"Really?" he said, a bit shocked. "I mean, of course! You're welcome to. Who else?"

"I'll go with you," said Tifa. "I need to get stronger if I'm going to keep up with Cloud when we find him."

"Vincent, you lucky dog!" said Susan, bumping him with an elbow. "Having two beautiful girls at your side as you roam the land, destroying all creatures in sight. How did you manage it?"

"Clean living," he deadpanned.

"I'm with my living *Materia* detector, I mean good buddy Susan!" said Yuffie, linking arms.

"And I'll need to stick around to help fly the Highwind," said Cid.

"I'm no help finding *Materia*," said Barret. "That leaves Cait Sith and Na with me. What to you guys want to do?"

"I suppose you're not one much for research, either?" asked Na.

"Not especially."

Na shook his head. "I guess Cosmo Canyon is out. There is a wealth of information there, but pouring through it to find what's relevant, that's the key."

"Do it yourself!"

He tried to stand on his hind paws, holding his front paws up for inspection. "No thumbs."

"Ah, always some excuse. Hey Cait Sith, where's these Huge *Materia* you talked about?"

"Let's see, there's one in an underwater reactor off Junon. One in the Condor Fort reactor. The Corel Mountain reactor made one--"

"Corel? We're heading there! That's my hometown, I know it best."

"Okay, I'll give Shinra the word. It'll be ready to move within the hour."

"Drop us off a little ways away then, we'll take the rest of the journey on foot, rack up some XP in the bargain. Like Cloud said, we did miss some with Susan moving us about before."

"Sounds like we have our plan," said Vincent. "Keep in touch."

"Yeah, if you run into trouble, I can reach you guys pretty quickly, so keep that in mind."

Everyone nodded, and Cid told the pilot where they wanted to go. With the groups dropped off, Yuffie could barely contain herself, bouncing in place.

"Where shall we start looking first?"

“You’re asking me? Most of this world I’ve never seen, you know.”

“Come on, I’ll get the maps,” said Cid, turning to head back to the operation room.

“Wait a second,” said Susan, putting up a hand. “When you’re looking for something, it’s best to start with the easiest place first.”

“What do you mean?” asked Yuffie.

“We’re going shopping!”

It's a *Material* world

Time: Ten minutes later

Place: Costa Del Sol

Susan stepped from the Highwind onto the sandy beach of Costa Del Sol and fell in love.

With all the scantily clad women splashing around in tiny bathing suits.

In reality, she did fall in love, with the place. They had chosen it because it was near to Corel, where they had dropped off Barret, and Yuffie said she knew the owner of the *Materia* shop. She had worked there some time ago, the first time they had come to the town. Figuring they might get a better answer from an acquaintance, Susan agreed, and Cid had parked the Highwind and told them to go ahead. He was going to stay with the ship and look it over, make sure everything was in place. Arm in arm, the two girls nearly ran to the beach, taking in the sights.

It was sunny, warm, sandy, kids were playing, people were having fun... "This is more like it!" she exclaimed. "Forget ice and snow, why can't Sephiroth come here so we can beat him and work on our tans at the same time?"

"Yeah, he's so inconsiderate," agreed Yuffie. "Come on, *Materia* shop is over there."

She pointed to a man standing behind a table, parked next to a yellow van. There was a blue and white striped awning keeping the sun off him, and he was totally not dressed for the weather. Of course, he was balding, pudgy, and sweating, and nobody wants to see any more of that than they have to.

"Good day, sir!" she said brightly, stepping up to the man.

"Hello, miss. How can I help you today?"

"I wish to purchase some *Materia*, and I'm looking to spend a bit of money."

Even as she spoke, the amount of *Gil* the party had available was going up. With two groups currently wandering the world in search of monsters to kill, and killing said monsters, their money and item totals were steadily being raised.

"Take a look at what I have," said the man, bringing out a long wooden case with a glass panel in the top. Inside she could see six Green *Materia* and each was labeled. "Fire, Ice, Lighting, Earth, Gravity, Poison." "You don't even have to spend a lot, they're current industry pricing for this type."

"Ah, yes, so I see." Each little card had the price next to it, from 600 to 8000 *Gil* for the Gravity one. "But I think you don't properly take my meaning. I'm looking to spend a bit more than even that." She pointed to the most expensive one and winked conspiratorially.

"Uh, I'm still not sure what you mean, I'm afraid."

"I mean I want your premium stuff. The stuff for the most discerning customers. The stuff in the back room. The hush-hush stuff. Stop me any time."

"This is my entire current stock, there is no more."

"That always bothered me," said Yuffie, stepping up. "Even when I was working here. He's telling the truth. He can sell you a hundred Fire *Materia* but not a single *Steal Materia*. Why is that?"

"I sell what I sell, there's no conspiracy behind it," he said with a forced laugh.

"Come now, you buy *Materia* as well, don't you?" asked Yuffie.

"You know we do."

"So where does it go? Are you telling me not a single person in the last month has sold you a *Materia* that's had some growth? You pay enough for them, I figure you would want to resell them and double your money. That is how the industry works, right? You buy at half cost, sell at full cost? We want to see those, so get them out! You must have *one!* Or other magic apart from this junk we already have tons of!" She waved a hand dismissively.

"I... only sell what you see before you! I guess it's just bad luck you've come when I don't have anything else." The man seemed clearly agitated now, eyes darting about and mopping his brow. "Yes, bad luck, nothing else."

"I don't buy it," said Yuffie, turning to Susan. "I've never thought about it before, but

every store in every town we've ever visited only sells a couple of different *Materia*. And they always have exactly zero AP. You would think you would get them in all ranges, as people buy and sell them. I mean we're willing to pay more for one we don't have to raise as far, but apparently we can't buy anything like that? Even if we're willing to spend more. Because ones sold in shops always start at zero. Can you tell me why that is, Mr. Shopkeeper?"

The man gave a quick shake of his head and took a step backwards, almost seeming terrified now. "Please, I can't say more. If I don't have what you want I'm sorry, but that's the end of it. Now please go away!"

"Very well," said Susan, with a shake of her head. "We just want to give you money, but if you can't take it..."

Both girls turned and walked away, but Sparkle stayed a moment more, looking up at the man. When the two were a fair distance away he dashed into his van and started punching numbers into his phone, which he nearly dropped several times because his hands were shaking so badly.

Curious, thought Sparkle, turning and padding after Susan. *Very curious.*

The pair checked out the other shops (including the rather depressed looking fellow selling armor inside the bar, of all places) and went down the steps to check out the beach. "We really should get going," said Susan. "We can enjoy this place when the planet is safe."

"I know," sighed Yuffie. "I didn't get to be the number one ninja by slacking off." Susan didn't need *Detect Lies* to tell that either part of that statement might not exactly be the truth. "When do I get to slack off?"

"When you're eighty?"

"How will I enjoy it then, I'll be too old to enjoy it!"

"I wish I knew, Yuffie. Come on."

They boarded the Highwind again, to find Cid examining the control panel.

"You weren't gone long!"

"Not for lack of trying. Hey, have you ever seen a shop that sold anything but zero AP *Materia*?" asked Susan.

Cid scratched his head. "Now that you mention it, probably not. Never thought about it before, really."

"No, and the man behind the counter seemed very upset that we did. Well, can we get in the air again?"

"Sure, we're already ready for takeoff. Where to now, ladies?"

"Yeah, we checked the easy one, now what about the less than easy one?" asked Yuffie.

Susan flashed a smile. "I can afford to be a bit wasteful with my energy, now that we're not getting into a million combats. I'm going up on deck, just fly to sites that are isolated and look like good spots for *Materia* to have grown. Hardened? Coalesced? Whatever it is that *Lifestream* does to make this stuff."

"That's easy enough, but what are you going to be doing?"

"Me?" Susan tried to look innocent. "Cheating, of course."

Susan had Sparkle put *Energetic Accumulation* on her, then gathered 30 energy. This left her with little more than half, but like she said, it wasn't too much of a concern. That done, she used the entire shot on *Augment Skill: Spirit Sense*, grating her a total rating of 38. This gave her a range on making *Spirit Sense* checks from thirty nine to forty eight. As a check of 30 was considered "nearly impossible" she felt she was in good shape. She requested the magic until their hunt for *Materia* was over for the day, and sat on the deck, feeling the energy of the world flow beneath her.

And so flew the Highwind. Cid checked his maps, hovering the ship over mountains, valleys, islands, and plains. With her energy senses far in access of any human before her, she could feel even the black energy of the Northern Crater, thousands of miles away from it. She found she could point to it with her eyes closed no matter where they were. She could

feel lines of energy encircling the world, and in those remote places where there was no life- a tiny spark. For one she had to slip into the water and do a bit of swimming, as the Highwind couldn't land directly near the island where she felt the spark. She climbed up on the beach and headed inside, pulling a Blue *Materia* out for her own.

For the second she had to fly, the cave where she felt the spark was inaccessible as it was surrounded by mountains and water. So as the Highwind hovered above, she dropped out of the sky and pulled a Yellow *Materia* from the ground.

And for the third she swam a small river, to another cave surrounded by desert on one side, and high mountains on the other. From there she pulled a Pink *Materia*, and fairly shoved it into the waiting hands of Yuffie to get rid of it.

"Careful, they can break you know!" she chided, looking it over.

"Sorry, but that one I must never, ever touch again."

"Why? Oh, it seems to switch your MP and your HP. That's... odd."

"You're telling me. I don't *have* MP, so I have no clue what it would do. Maybe kill me?"

"Oh my gosh, you're right. It just might. Okay, into inventory it goes. How do we decide who gets the other two?" She pulled them out and seemed to balance them between her hands.

"Yellow is best for me, actually, and that one seems particularly suited for me," said Susan, taking it. "If I'm understanding this correctly, whatever someone last did near me, the user of this does that again? I could actually contribute a little more to combat, if I used it right after someone used your kind of magic."

"True." She sighed. "And I suppose Vincent will want this one. Imagine using his Lightning combo four times in row!"

"Imagine doing it eight times, if I *Mimic* it!"

"Oh yeah, you're right. Nice."

"Of course I think he would have to give up his linked All, because it won't hit all enemies four times. I guess for bosses though, it can't be beat."

"You got that right."

"So are we done for today, ladies?" asked Cid. "It's been hours, the others will want to eat soon, and while we've been racing across the globe, we will need to rest soon. We can make the sun be in the sky wherever we want, but we still have to sleep."

"True. Very well. Captain, let us away to find our companions, and hear the valiant tales of their bravery this day!"

Yuffie laughed. "And don't forget, they will need to hear our story as well, faithful companion!"

"Indeed, faithful companion!"

"To wing!" she shouted, pointing.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

So the Highwind picked up both groups, Vincent's group first. He was indeed quite pleased with the new acquisition. "In fact, I may use it all the time," he said, seeming to weigh his options. "We don't run into large groups very often, where *Enemy All* is best suited. If I can cast once, get MP, HP, and Attack four times per casting... no sorry, that would be one regular attack at the end. Still... having four chances to get MP/HP back? I'm sold. Thanks." He slipped in into his armor and went to settle in while the Highwind traveled to Corel.

"Glad it can help. And Aerith seems quite pleased with herself. Did this little kitty catch a canary?"

"Even better. Vincent loaned me his shotgun. I might give up attacking with the staff and switch to guns."

"Can't beat a shotgun!" Vincent called behind him.

"What's wrong with the staff?" asked Yuffie. "Bonk! I love that sound it makes when you hit something, Aerith. Bonk!"

"That's just it. Take a look at the staff I've been using."

"Okay?" She got it out and looked it over. "Good number of linked slots on this..."

"Sure, but the attack is hardly above fifty. Vincent's Lariat does twelve more, and I have a better chance of hitting with it!"

“That’s true. Doesn’t the staff raise your Spirit and Vitality?”

“Like that matters.”

“Yeah, what do those stats even do, anyway?”

The others shrugged.

“In any case,” she said, taking the staff back. “I can also attack from the back row, keeping me safer. It’s just a smart move.”

“I approve,” said Susan. “If you can handle the shotgun, do it. Wait, different staves have different attack? Okay, Sparkle, explain that one. One staff can’t be sharper than another, they’re all blunt weapons!”

“Weights in the top? I don’t know.”

“Uh huh. Damage dealing is weird wherever you go, I guess. Shall we head to Core!?”

The group found a small celebration going, centered around Barret.

“Good day, Barret?” Susan asked, looking around the town. Booze seemed to feature predominately.

“Very good!” he exclaimed. “I got the you-know-what, and saved the whole dang town in the process. See that train over there?”

Susan looked, and there were the remains of a train, lying on its side, close to the tracks. “I see it.”

“Didn’t quite know how to slow it down, so I threw a bunch of grenades under it and blew it off the track. How about that?”

“Good thinking. Dangerous, but good thinking. Or do you people not take damage from falls? Anyway, we’re here to pick you up, and we have news! Unless you want to stay the night?”

“Nah, too much celebrating isn’t good for you. I’m leaving, everybody! Off to save some more towns, you know?” The people around cheered and toasted him, and the full group was back together.

Susan told them what she had been told by the shopkeeper, and everyone agreed it was probably worth looking into. Sometime, when things weren’t so messed up with the world, of course.

With that done, they ate, and Susan finally got her lesson in beginners Ninjutsu from Yuffie. By having a teacher she could spend double on it, and as her REASON allowed her to spend a little more than one XP a day, double that was the two XP she needed to get a one rating in a martial art. She took the two from her *Disguise* skill, as she wasn’t really doing makeup that often now. (And if she did need to do it, that’s what *Augment Skill* was for, right?)

She also, that night, set the *Mimic Materia* on her book and told it to figure how to replicate it, which it did. In the morning she had a brand new spell of *Emulation*, from Saturn. It was grade 7, and had some limitations, but Susan hoped to raise this one and make it split, so she could have the “baby.” *On second thought, I’ll take the mastered one. If I leave them the baby, they can easily make another. If I take the one that’s split, it won’t split again and they’ll be stuck.*

The next day, Susan spent the morning with the “leveling” group, getting some “fake” XP and putting some AP into *Mimic*. She had a double AP armor equipped, which her book didn’t actually detail. (As only this world had that specific method of doing things) She still felt it was going to take a depressingly long time to raise, but she did have fun doing whatever it was the others were doing, and with Vincent’s nearly unlimited MP, they cut a swath across the landscape such as never had been seen before. (Not that it mattered, monsters seemed to exist in unlimited numbers in each area.)

In the afternoon they flew about to various towns, letting Susan see them in case she had to return to one in a hurry. They checked out the shops, bought some stuff with their new *Gil*, and Susan ignored the dirty looks she got from *Materia* shop owners and tried to see about getting more information. She tried both *Seduction* and *Persuasion* checks under *Augment Skill*, both higher than normal (but not near the 30s like before). And she *still* got nowhere. In fact she swore a shop owner she had never, ever seen before actually tell her he

was completely out of stock when she asked.

She went back in, *Shape-shifted* into someone completely different, and he had plenty of stock to show that girl. *But none for Susan, the Inquisitive Girl. Why is that, do we think?*

She continued that evening getting some lessons from Yuffie, who seemed rather pleased to have someone to teach. The night before she had been rather show-offy, (Susan didn't care, she was show-offy too. It was just having a teacher that mattered so she could "officially" put the skill down on her sheet and give it the one rating.) She couldn't raise it to two (which cost four) until the next night, but she appreciated Yuffie's commitment to the team. She even showed Tifa some things, as it seemed she had learned a different martial art growing up and was eager to compare them.

Why the men of the group suddenly seemed interested in also being on deck as the three girls jumped around, getting all sweaty and putting each other in throws and such was a mystery. (Okay, that's a lie, it's no mystery at all.) Susan even invited Aerith to change and join them, but she said she would be sticking to guns from now on, thank you very much.

"And quite sensibly, too," said Vincent. "All that rushing about seems rather exhausting. Magic and guns- that's really all you need."

"You don't know what you're missing!" said Yuffie, who was positively beaming. "Come on, Susan, you can get that leg up a little higher on the kick! Come on, stretch!"

The next day Susan dutifully asked her *Question* of where Cloud was, and to her surprise, got a different answer than *Lifestream*.

"Anyone know where the town of Mideel is?" she asked.

"Sort of on an island, pretty far south. Why?"

"Let's go there, I have a good feeling."

Tifa bowled her over, running from nowhere. "Did you find him? Did you find him?" she was saying, grabbing Susan's shoulders.

"And what shall we have for breakfast today, do you think? Or would you like to wait and have it with Cloud?"

Tifa gave a whoop of joy, hugged Susan tight, and ran to the cockpit to watch the approach.

"I guess that's a yes?"

"Please tell me you can cure him!" Tifa pleaded, as Susan and Aerith crowded around the catatonic form of Cloud. As her magic had told her, he had washed up that morning on the shores of Mideel, and brought into the ramshackle village. Apparently it was a "hot springs town" and many people of advanced age stayed there. Hence the need for a lot of medical staff in a world of cure potions and recovery magic. The town itself was pretty tropical, and the local architecture reflected that. Plain, wooden buildings seemed the norm here, worked into the greenery as though they had all grown up together.

"I'm not sure there is a cure," said the doctor from the other room. "Except time."

"Wasn't talking to you," Tifa muttered.

"Shove over," said Susan, and Tifa made room for her. Susan took Cloud's hands in hers, and he responded by drooling a bit and looking around with unfocused eyes. She made several *Sense* checks, from *Magic* to *Spirit*, and she didn't like what she discovered. She got an eleven on magic sense, but only a four on *Spirit*, her current rating of two not very helpful. Her nine was a bit more useful when she tried again, enough to know something weird was now going on with his biology.

"I'm surprised he isn't glowing, all the life energy he absorbed," she began. "Even with a nine I can feel it. It's like a million different *Materia* all tried to crowd inside his brain at once."

"Did someone mention *Materia*?" shouted a voice from outside.

"Not now, Yuffie!"

"Sorry!"

"As I was saying. He actually fell into the *Lifestream*. Imagine what that must be like—it's not air, so you can't breathe. But it's not really liquid, though it has some liquid like properties if it can well up out of the ground. It gets in your lungs and you think you're going to die... but you can't. It's literally life energy. It will not allow you to die. Even a man like this, a soldier, floating there, lungs burning, well, it didn't help the situation any, let's put it that way."

"You can feel that?"

"I feel a combination of the weird sort of magical energy that happens when you use *Materia*, and him being suffused with a weird sort of analog to what I call *Spirit Energy* now. First step in any sort of recovery for him is somehow purging that energy from his system. The magical energy is actually really easy. I drop *Dead Magic* on the whole place and it vanishes like it never was. The life energy, well, I don't want to kill him, so taking that out will be a little more tricky. Too much and I might grab his own soul. Too little and I might as well not bother at all."

"But possible?"

"I think so. I have a spell to transfer *Spirit Energy* from those that have it to myself. So I know it can transfer various energies around. Now, I don't want to directly take this energy into myself because it's not exactly *Spirit Energy* and it's not exactly whatever MP is. That's why it's hurting him. If I take it on, he might get a little better but I would get a lot worse. And there's no one that can do the same for me. So I'm going to leave my book with him, and tell it to come up with a spell that can transfer that energy into a suitable vessel. One which I think we already have taken possession of."

"Huge *Materia*!"

"Did someone—"

"Not now, Yuffie!" both shouted.

"Sorry!"

"You're right though. It's the closest thing to this energy you've got. And being Big McLarge Huge *Materia* it should hold the energy just fine without blowing the crystal to bits."

"Maybe we should get the others, just in case," suggested Aerith. "I mean, is this why there's four of them? Are we going to need four? I mean why would there be four if we didn't need four, right? What did Sparkle call it?"

"Narrative Imperative. It is suspicious, us learning of the Big M word just before finding

him. And needing a vessel to draw the energy away from him?"

"What if you weren't here, though?" asked Aerith. "How would he have cured him then?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have. After all, if I wasn't here, you wouldn't be here to ask the question of how they would have cured him if I wasn't here."

"Buh?" asked Cloud, staring past Susan at something only he could see.

"My thoughts exactly," agreed Aerith.

"This energy will probably drain away by itself, but I have no idea how long that could take. I mean maybe you could 'ground' him in some way, pull it off that way? You guys have more of an understanding of Mako than I do. At least, maybe Shnira scientists do. Maybe they could take that energy and turn it into electricity, with whatever process they have? Pulling it out of a living body must be different than sucking it directly out of the ground though."

"Months to years," said the doctor, poking his head through. "To drain off naturally, I mean. Mako poisoning is bad enough, this is an extreme case. Worst I've ever seen, or heard about."

Susan snorted. "If only it was poison. That we could deal with. It's this energy that's scrambling his brains, no doubt."

"Could you hit him with that knife of yours? Maybe it'll work!" suggested Tifa.

Susan shook her head. "I've always been cautious mixing different types of magic. I once prevented someone from talking about something, then someone else magically tried to force them to talk about that thing. She nearly died. That was a poison, to my magic, so the knife worked. Plus it's the magic component of this condition that's the easy part. Like I said, destroy all magic in this area for a few seconds and it's gone too."

"So why would using your magic to pull the energy out not have some complication?" asked Aerith.

"It could, but he really can't get worse. And once that energy is gone, I can heal him normally. The spell puts things back the way they were before being hurt or damaged. It wasn't meant to purge *Lifestream* energy out of somebody. They don't have that where we come from. That's why I need a new spell, the sensors in my book can hopefully provide something that won't interact badly with the energy, and just draw it out."

"Do whatever you have to do," said Tifa. "Just get him back for me."

"You really like him, don't you?"

She nodded. "I always did, since we were little."

"Aw!" Susan and Aerith both clasped their hands and tilted their heads. She gave them a dark look. Susan and Aerith looked at each other and laughed.

"Wha?" put in Cloud.

"You got it, Cloud. You're one lucky fellow, you know that?" Susan stage whispered. "Her boobs are enormous!"

"Can we get on with this?" Tifa snapped.

"Sure thing!" said Susan, drawing her book out of the sub-space pocket. Naturally the *Pocket Dimension* was just as easy to keep it in, there was no danger of it being locked out in this world. It just didn't cost her any energy, and looked cooler to pull it out of nowhere. She stuck the book by his leg, shoving it to one side. The gems lit up. "Now, bring me the crystal!" She pressed her fingertips together rapidly. "The *Materia* crystal!"

She waited, her fingers stopped.

"The *Materia* crystal!" she said louder, her fingers moving even faster.

She waited.

She went to the door, cupping her hands around her mouth.

"THE MATERIA CRYSTAL!!!!!"

Several of the people nearby looked at her strangely.

"What?" shouted Yuffie, sticking her head out of a nearby building. "You have to see this baby Chocobo! He's sooooo cute!"

Susan heaved a great sigh. "I'll just get it myself, shall I?" She went to the Highwind and got the *Huge Materia* out, then brought it back. She stuck it next to the book, so it was touching both him and the crystal. "Find a way to draw the *Lifestream* energy out of this person and drain it into this or similar crystals," she told it.

“And now we wait,” said Aerith.

“Wait, and go see a cute Chocobo chick apparently.”

“I’ll stay here,” said Tifa. “I’ll want to watch him.”

Susan put a hand on her shoulder. “I know. He would surely do the same, if the situation was reversed. I’ll come see if you need anything in a little while, okay?” *Probably best to have a strong fighter here watching the Materia in any case.*

“Okay.”

Susan and Aerith left, heading into town to see what it had to offer them. She was getting more used to the party just barging into places but it still seemed kind of weird to her.

Just don’t get too used to it and start trying it on other worlds, I guess?

She picked up a Crystal Sword, just because it looked so cool, like it had been cut from some kind of huge crystal. It had two less *Materia* slots than the Enhance Sword the group had found at the Gaea area, and she wanted to keep raising stuff for them, so she wasn’t using it. She stuck it into her own *Pocket Dimension*, rather than the inventory.

She also picked up an “Amulet” which she considered a steal at 10,000 gill. It raised her LUCK by 10! That might be nothing to people who had maximum stats of 255 (Yuffie’s luck was a 30 right now, while her strength was a 50) but for her, that was the maximum LUCK she could have, and then some. *Plus it’s an Amulet, not a ring. I could wear it under my clothes and no one would even know.*

She was going to buy a Wizard Bracelet, a low defense object that had eight linked slots, but she saw the group had one in inventory and figured she might just ask to have that one before she left. She didn’t care about the “defense” value the thing had, but *Materia* slots, that was something useful.

The *Materia* shop owner eyed her suspiciously, but she let Aerith look the stock over and they only had five, nothing the group didn’t already have in quantity.

They spent the night at the inn, and in the morning she went to see what the book had come up with.

“As expected,” she told the others, having collected it and the *Huge Materia*. They were all sitting on the step outside the “hospital” building. “It’s going to take all four to safely contain the energy currently in Cloud. The spell says each crystal can only hold a certain amount more, if the crystals are all similar. Given what I felt inside him, that’s the safest route. I don’t want to shove energy in there and then have it blow up in our faces.

“The grade 7 Pluto spell of *Lifestream Transfer* can move the infecting energy between any two targets. Get this, it can actually drain energy out of a standard *Materia*, in effect, transferring AP between two of them. It seems “AP” is actually a tiny amount of life force from the destroyed creature, captured upon killing them. Huh. That makes a tremendous amount of sense, actually. That’s why it must be in your weapon or armor, to provide that channel. Just carrying it in your pocket isn’t enough to level it.” *Right, I should have guessed. Stuff like XP and MP are abstractions, even for me. I can’t hold them, but something is behind it, it’s not just a number. It’s a way of representing something I’ve gained or lost. In this case, Materia is crystalized Lifestream, life energy, so it’s probably attracted to itself. That “raises” the Materia and when it can’t hold any more, it either explodes or fissions. Luckily this world took the fission route, and a new Materia is born. Neat. The “AP” is just a way of quantifying the level of energy inside the crystal, just like gas inside a gas tank. We could use numbers to represent it, but we usually use a gauge because that’s easier to comprehend at a glance when driving.*

“We’ll try that first, I want to get a feel for the spell before we try it on a person.”

“Good call,” said Tifa. “Though I trust your magic.”

“So do I, but casting a spell for the first time on a living person? Especially something untried like this? No thank you. So, if you have some *Materia* you want brought back down to zero while another is raised, get it out. Maybe those *Earth* ones you don’t use anymore, shove their AP into the *Lighting* ones you do?”

So Susan read the spell over, getting seventeen and fourteen on *Scripture* and *Theory*,

respectively, both enough to understand the difficulty twelve spell. She then put the two in front of her (the range was (T)Special, meaning she had to be close enough to touch the subjects, but not actually touch them.) and spent a few minutes transferring "AP" out of the *Materia* they no longer used.

As that worked perfectly, Susan was confident that with the four *Huge Materia*, Cloud could be purged of the *Lifestream* and his recovery could begin.

"The next one we should get is the Condor Reactor one," suggested Barret. "Shinra has been hitting that place off and on since we got out of Midgar. Once we take the *Materia* out, there will be no more reason to attack it!"

"Not a problem," said Cait Sith, "I'll have the final attack force move in before noon. You can get there before then, right?"

"You better believe it, cat."

"Wait, attack force? I don't want to hurt any Shinra soldiers," protested Susan.

"Nah, nothing like that," said Cait Sith. "Shinra typically sends a bunch of monsters they've rounded up against the place."

"The first time we went there, we didn't have a lot of money," explained Aerith. "We did it the way the people holed up there suggested, getting different mercenaries to fight for us." She gave a great sigh. "They all got wiped out, and in the end, the boss monster rushed the place. We had to go ourselves and defeat it."

"Then the next time we went over there, we didn't bother with the mercenaries. Waste of money," further explained Barret. "We just rushed them ourselves. Why let them get all the money, XP and AP?"

Susan had to admit, that was a little silly. "So we'll just do the same now?"

"Darn right. Get them going, spy, we'll take off in a little while."

"If it's all the same to you, I'll stay here," said Tifa. "I want to make sure Cloud is all right."

"If you're staying, I'll stay," said Aerith.

Tifa didn't look overjoyed at this proclamation, but recognized her claim to be there. *And who will he be happier to see, when he finally is lucid again?*

The group ate a leisurely breakfast, and hopped in the Highwind to head to the reactor.

We just left the Highwind sitting there. Why don't monsters attack it? I mean they're roaming around, right? Even if we can't see them... and I still haven't figured out how that's supposed to make sense. What keeps them out of towns, for that matter?

At the entrance to the resistance base carved into the rock, Susan looked at the thin rope the others wanted her to climb. *I don't actually have... wait a second.* She got out her character sheet, and yes, there was *Climbing* in a skill group with *Catching* and *Bicycle* and *Gymnastics*. *Just found some more skills to cannibalize! I don't think I've ever used Catching or Bicycle. What was I thinking? Gymnastics might be useful, if I combined it with my martial arts.*

She made her *Climbing* check with a four, because she rolled absolute minimum, and got nowhere on her first attempt.

"Not a word," she said to her companions. She tried again, getting an eight but taking the -1 for retrying, but technically her difficulty was at a -1 for the rope, as she was technically climbing the rock face, not the rope itself. So it evened out in the end, and she scrambled up it.

Once inside, she looked around, even visiting the little rest area they had, with the save point near the beds she had been told about some time ago.

"You guys should save," she said, looking at it.

"You're right! Aerith isn't here, so I keep forgetting!" said Barret, going over to it.

"Thanks!"

That done, the party was Barret, Na, and Vincent, as he still hadn't forgiven Yuffie. (And he wasn't going to use Cait Sith, are you crazy?) And Susan, of course.

She watched as the odd creatures walked or flew up the mountain, uncontested. Once they reached the shack they encircled it and the “boss,” a Cmd. Grandhorn, came out, and the group rushed it. Na threw some *Meteors* at it, with the Green *Materia* of the same name, and Susan went back and forth Mimicking that and Vincent’s lighting blasts. In between, Barret shot it a bunch of times that was that, they got a new armor, the Imperial Guard, and 800 XP, 80 AP.

“Done!” said Barret, examining the armor. “Why did Shinra even bother?”

“Are you guys, and I hate to say this because coming from me you have no idea the irony value, but are you guys, I don’t know, overleveled for all of this? To use your term, I mean.”

“Maybe,” said Barret, unconcerned. “Consider our opponent. We need to get stronger yet.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“It’s a good cycle,” explained Vincent. “Before we had the Highwind we walked everywhere. That gave us plenty of opportunity to fight things. That raised our level. It also gave us money, that we could use to buy better equipment. Also some monsters, like this one, drop or have better stuff we can *Steal*. That further increases our effectiveness. That lets us fight tougher stuff, getting us more money, letting us buy even better stuff.”

“I see what you’re saying. Man, the economy here must be really bizarre, if anyone can just walk around and make money beating up monsters that roam the countryside.”

“Any case, let’s grab the *Huge Materia* and get on the next one. Cait Sith, what have we got left?”

“Junon and the one loaded onto the rocket.”

“Rocket? What’s this about a rocket?” demanded Cid.

“Yeah, to keep up appearances Shinra is going to slam the rocket into Meteor. For good measure they’ve got a *Huge Materia*, or to the press a “secret weapon” aboard. They calculated the mass of the thing, and there’s not enough explosive power in the rocket fuel that will be left, but they have to be seen trying everything.”

“We’re going there next!” he decided.

Barret shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“I’ll let them know you’re coming.”

Getting the last two

Time: About an hour later

Place: Heading into Rocket Town

“Still can’t believe they had already taken the *Huge Materia* out of the reactor. Half an hour scouring the place, and he had it all along!” Barret was fuming, stomping along with the others.

“At least we got a new Red *Materia*,” said Yuffie, skipping along beside him. “And it seems super useful!”

“Yeah, yeah. I suppose if Shinra had taken it back, that would be the ultimate nose tweak. They get away with the prize and Shinra gets nothing.”

“What can we expect here?” Susan asked Cait Sith.

“Not much in the way of opposition, of course. I think one of the Turks is here overseeing things.”

“Oh, them?” said Na. “They always seem to flee after we beat them up a little.”

“Guess we don’t have to hold back, then,” said Barret, stroking his gun arm.

“That’s why he was chosen for this mission,” explained Cait Sith. “Don’t want any pointless heroics now, do we?”

“We are letting them launch the rocket, though, right?” asked Cid, concerned.

“Sure, let Shinra put on their little play. Get rid of this rusty old tin can anyway.”

“Hey, be careful how you talk about #26! It would have gone into space if it hadn’t been for that idiot scientist Shera.”

“Of all the words of voice and pen, the saddest are ‘it might have been,’” said Susan.

“Yeah, what do you know?”

She glared at him.

“Sorry, I’m just a little on edge right now. Ignore me.”

“Done! Now come on, the rocket awaits.”

Having climbed the rusting metal ladder to get into the rocket, the group had a fight with the Turk Rude, and Susan managed to steal a Ziedrich armor from him. He then got zapped a bunch of times and retreated.

“I don’t think he’s leveled up at all since we last fought,” remarked Vincent. “Shame. The Turks had such promise in the beginning, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. Anyone not going into space, better clear out of here. Go warn the townspeople this rocket’s going to be taking off in a little while.”

“Space is out of my radio range,” said Cait Sith, “I’m staying.”

“I’m keeping my paws on the ground,” said Na.

“Space?” said Barret, backing away a step. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“No *Materia* in space, but once Susan leaves, I can claim to be the only woman ever who went. No one will be able to say different. I’m going.”

“Are you sure this thing isn’t just going to blow up on the ground?” asked Vincent.

“You think I would go inside if it was?”

“For the chance to get to space, maybe. I better come, just in case.”

“That’s settled then. Come on.”

The group piled in, and the others went to warn everyone away from the platform.

From what I know about rocket launches, which isn’t much, don’t you need like millions of gallons of water to keep the platform from just being vaporized? They dump it as the rockets fire, right? Of course they won’t be using this one again, I guess...

“Hey, captain!” said one of the men working in the control room. “About time you finally showed up.”

“I wouldn’t miss this, you know that. Gonna give that *Meteor* what for, right?”

“That’s right! Hey, do you know what they’ve loaded into the nose? That Turk guy wouldn’t even tell us!”

“Ah, who knows what they’ve cooked up, right? Look, how’s the rocket? Will it fly?”
“We’ve checked it over, and while it won’t make two trips, it should make one. Don’t worry, it’ll make it.”

“That’s all I wanted to hear.”

“Wait, you are going yourself, are you? That’s suicide!”

“Not to worry, I’ll bail before we get anywhere near that piece of rock. If there’s a problem you’ll need someone to correct it, and who better than me?”

The others agreed that was true enough.

“But what about them?”

“What about them? You let me worry about who I’m taking and get this rocket ready to lift off!”

“Yes sir!” They saluted and ran out of the place.

“Where are you all going?”

“It’s done. If you’re going to pilot it, we can launch any time,” said one, turning back.

“We’ll get everything checked on the ground and make sure everyone is clear.”

“Oh. Fine, get out of here. See you when we get back!”

With that, the rocket soon launched, but not before Susan put *Invulnerability* on everyone so nobody blacked out during the ascent. (Or if the thing blew up, they would all live through it.) There were no complications, and the group went up to see about getting the *Huge Materia* before leaving.

“Looks like some kind of security system, but I don’t know the code,” said Cid. “Want to just try guessing it? There can’t be more than thousands of combinations, given a four character PIN where each digit could be used independently of-”

While he had been talking, Susan cast *Retrieval* and was looking the crystal over.

“Or, we could just do that. Come on, escape pod is this way.”

“Wait, how long until we hit the *Meteor*?”

“Days, I suppose. Turns out space is really big!” He gave a hearty laugh.

“Great. Sparkle, I may need your energy.”

“You’ve got it, but why?” she answered.

“We’re going to leave *Meteor* a little gift, since we’re here. And make sure the impact is nice and spectacular for those on the ground.”

Susan spent some time reading over *Solar Orb*, getting a fifteen on *Scripture* and eighteen on *Theory*. She then spent all the time she could casting *Spell Trigger* and *Solar Orb* into the room. She managed it about a dozen times, putting in a little extra energy each time and then taking some of Sparkle’s to boot. Everywhere you looked the metal of the rocket’s nose cone had brands on it, set to go off with the impact of the rocket against *Meteor*.

“That should give everyone a light show they won’t soon forget. Just one of those burns like the sun, and I’ve got this room laced with a dozen.”

“You think it’ll take out *Meteor* by itself?” asked Cid.

“One can hope, but I guess we’ll see.”

While she had been working, a dull boom sounded beneath them, and the others ran down to see what it was. Apparently an oxygen tank had exploded, and it turned out Shera was aboard as well.

“You withstood those g-forces and didn’t even have a padded chair or anything?” said Susan, when she was brought up. “You’re one gutsy lady! Cid, marry her immediately.”

“She’s the only person who will be able to put with him,” agreed Vincent.

“You are okay, right? I can heal you if you need it.”

Shera shook her head. “I’m fine, but thanks for asking. Sorry I stowed away, but I had to make sure everything was perfect.”

“Guess I owe you an apology,” said Cid quietly. “That tank would have given us trouble all those years ago.”

“Or not, it could have been the stress of age. We’ll never know.”

“Still... Aren’t you done yet, Susan?”

“Just a couple more...”

And when it was done they all piled into the escape pod, Susan checked and yes, *Invulnerability* was still there just in case, and Cid pressed the release button. The sphere was ejected and everyone in the pod enjoyed their first look at the stars without atmosphere in the way. The rocket was on course, and several days later impacted, blowing it half to bits with at least twelve OTR/HDL[10] *Solar Orbs*. It lit up the sky, temporality giving the planet two suns, but afterwards the *Meteor* started piecing itself back together, as if by magic. Which it was. The Shinra corporation looked good, the group got the *Materia* they wanted, everyone was happy.

Susan rested the rest of the day, having no source of energy to replenish her supply, and in the morning they went after the last *Huge Materia*, kept in the underwater reactor off Junon.

Rather than fly back, Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to the harbor town, and Cait Sith led them down to where the reactor was.

"Is it just me, or is there a lot less activity here?" asked Susan.

"Every pair of hands that's able is up working on getting the cannon ready for transport," he explained. "There's a lot to be done, and not a lot of time to do it in."

"Glad you can pal around with us then," said Barret sarcastically.

"You think I'm not doing my part? The Shinra are totally cooperating with you now, you know that, right? You won... without firing a shot. You want *Huge Materia*, we're giving it to you. We're not trying to arrest you any more, despite knowing your every move. We gave you the Highwind. What more could you want?"

"Guess you're right. All it took was a crazy inter-dimensional threat and the looming extinction of the entire world."

"What's your point?"

"Never mind."

"Look, my job is to be the go between for you and the Shinra Corporation. That's what I'm doing, and it's important work. The sooner we get Cloud fixed up the sooner you guys can move on. Susan will provide us the means to get the barrier down, and hopefully by that time you'll be ready to assault the crater with us. We all win, Barret. We know the cost of using Mako now, and we'll phase it out and come up with something else. Promise."

"And don't be too hard on Shinra," said Susan. "Most of this is the fault of The Darkness. We don't know how long it's been manipulating events here. If it hadn't done what it did, it would have done something else similar. Believe me."

"I guess we did win. All right, so where's this last *Materia*?"

"The reactor is this way."

The group went down an elevator that went underwater, and took a very beautiful tunnel to the reactor building itself. Susan and Yuffie both exclaimed over the dolphins that were swimming about, seemingly without a care.

"We aren't just fighting for us," she said, looking up at them. "We're fighting for all life on this planet. The Darkness will take their life energy just as readily as ours."

Throughout the tunnels down to this place there were still random encounters, just nothing alive. Weird, automated machines, mostly weak to lighting, tried to wear them down.

"I'm of two minds about this," said Vincent, blasting another group of automated Missile Launchers with Lit 2. "On the one hand, we can use the XP. On the other, they really made us slog through all this?"

"Probably no one thought to turn off the automatic defenses down here," apologized Cait Sith. "Sorry about that."

And there it was. Shafts of light piercing the murky water, looming in front of them like a castle was the Underwater Reactor. The group stepped up the door, and went inside.

Through the door two submarines sat in some kind of bay, a gaudy red one and a sleek gray one, both painted with the Shinra logo. A mechanical arm was heading across the bay,

and Susan could see tiny people far below them, waiting for something.

The group ran past them, hardly bothering to look, but Cid seemed interested. "Marvelous engineering," he remarked. "Not as good as flying, moving about underwater, but I wouldn't mind seeing the inside of one."

"We'll get you the tour later," grumped Barret. "Come on."

"Better save," said Susan, pointing to the save point they came upon past the dock area. Everyone but Susan touched the glowing light, she had never gotten the hang of those things. *If they have to come back, they can just tell me what happened. It'll be fine.*

Past some empty guard stations they came to the reactor itself, glowing with inner heat, as red energy and haze spewed out the top of it. The mechanical arm came into the room, and slowly went down into the top of the metal holding container.

"Nice of them to get it out for us," remarked Susan.

"Odd, no one said anything to me about it being removed," said Cait Sith. "Oh well."

They watched as the glow disappeared, and the *Huge Materia* was lifted out, gears groaning. It started moving back off to the left.

"They'll probably give it to us at the docks," Cait Sith said, "let's head that way."

They did, and saw the arm being lowered into the red submarine.

"Are they giving us a sub too?" asked Vincent. "Hey, why is Reno here?"

Reno, one of the Turks, dressed rather sloppily with his shirt untucked, turned around.

"Thought you and the crew might show up. I don't know where you got the information on these, but I'm keeping this one from you."

"We need that!" protested Na. "Is Shinra betraying us now, at the very end?"

"What are you talking about, beast? I work for Shinra, you do not. I don't know what your game is, but I'm ending it here."

"No, no, we're working together now!" protested Cait Sith, pushing to the front. "Didn't you get the memo?"

"What memo? Working with these guys? I don't buy it. What's your game, showing them top secret stuff like this?"

"It's all been cleared with Rufus, you have to believe me!"

"I don't have to do anything of the sort. I'm taking this *Materia* with me, you people can play with our new toy instead." He snapped his fingers, and a lumbering, oddly shaped robot wobbled over them. It had three stubby legs, but shoulders that could raise to a great height, and very long arms.

It advanced on the group, and the fighting team went into combat mode.

Susan won the *Initiative*, despite not being *Accelerated*, and having nothing to *Mimic* yet, she went for *Sense*.

"Twenty Four Thousand HP?" she shrieked, "How can that be fair?"

"We'll take it down," said Barret, "stay calm." He then put words to actions summoning Ramu, who called down lightning and blasted it.

Sparkle was up, and cast "*Elemental Line: Wind*" in a straight line under the creature. As things they were battling didn't tend to go anywhere, even the minor damage it caused every round could add up. Normally she would have cast *Acceleration* but she knew Cid had that covered, and he was up next.

Cid used the *Enemy Skill Materia* to get them *Big Guard*, which basically was their version of the spell, and it provided them a measure of protection for a little while.

Last to go was Vincent, who was now in his element. He blasted the thing with Lighting four times, then shot it once. One of the bolts hit an arm, which it seemed had HP apart from the main body. *Odd, that most things don't. How do they do that, anyway?*

Sadly it was now the armor's turn to go, and having nearly a half its HP blasted away put it in a sour mood. It plucked up Vincent from the field and started spinning with him, damaging him in the process. He was, for the moment, out of the fight.

"*Mimic* it," said Cid, holding. "It's the only other time we'll have that to cast!"

"Right." Susan did, and another four bolts of electricity slammed into the creature. She also dashed forward to smack it with her sword, but the damage from that was not even worth

calculating.

Cid then went, choosing *Trine* from the *Enemy Skill*, electrifying all three parts of the robot.

Barret took the simple expediency of shooting it again, as he knew it was now down to about 5000 HP.

Now Sparkle went again, and carefully considered. She tried *Destruction* on the robot's hand, the one holding Vincent. She took the -3 for the "called shot" but the extra time knowing the robot wouldn't attack again until she finished her action. She got an eighteen, and in the *Combust* rules (of all things, it's an ESPer skill) it says "an object has an effective CON check of 5 + twice DTR" and as this robot's hand has a DTR of 5, she blew it into a fine powder, and Vincent was back on the field.

He shook his head. "Thanks!"

"No problem."

Cid hit it with *Trine* again, then Barret delayed an action to allow Susan to *Mimic* it, which finished it off.

"After that... oh." Susan pointed ahead as the world came back into focus, and the red sub was gone.

"Shoot! Now what?" asked Vincent, looking around.

"We go after them, of course. Sub can't be that hard to pilot, right? And there's one sitting right there. Let's go!"

The group ran for it, (stopping to pick up the Leviathan Scales they had laying around, and the Scimitar at the other end of the dock) where they boarded the sub. Cid jumped into the cockpit (or whatever it's called on a submarine like this) and started looking over the controls. The others took the Shinra soldiers inside hostage, and started tying them up.

"Oh, this is going to be fun," said Yuffie, already looking a little green. "Before we leave, can you put me back on the Highwind. At least it's grounded for the moment."

"Sure, I can't cure motion sickness," said Susan, opening up her *Teleportal*. "See you soon!"

"I better."

After a bit of a false start and some terrible scraping noises, Cid managed to get the sub underway. Susan slapped *Augment Skill (Pilot Sub?)* on him but she wasn't sure if it worked out or not. He wasn't exactly trained for this, just using his domain knowledge of piloting "stuff" and figuring it out. But he chased the red sub down with the help of the others watching the sonar, and shot it down with torpedoes, which the sub seemed to have an unlimited amount of.

Why not, guns cause damage without bullets, why would a sub run out of the thing it can do damage with?

Susan put on *Breathe Water* and swam in through the hole in the side of the ship, then ran into a sealed door in the flooded compartment.

She shrugged, swam so her feet were touching the deck, and cast *Phase* on herself. That done she walked through the door to where the unhappy looking crew of the sub were preparing to suffocate.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "Would you like me to save your lives?"

"Uh, yes?" said a man in red. "But how? For that matter, how did you get in here?"

"Never mind that, my lad! You want out of here? I want you all blindfolded, now. Come on, there must be something around here we can use."

"No, captain, it must be some kind of trick!" said one of the soldiers. "She's going to blindfold us and then kill us somehow!"

"Sure, sure, that's a possibility. But riddle me this, batman..."

"How did you know my name was Batman?" asked one in a gravelly voice.

"Shhh," said other.

"If I was confident enough to come in here, alone, do you think I would really need to rob you of sight for the one action it would take you to take it off if we went into combat?"

"I... guess not."

"Come on fellows, time is wasting and you're burning oxygen."

“All right, form up and everyone find something to tie around your eyes,” shouted the captain. “I have no idea what’s going on, maybe this is some kind of hallucination brought on by lack of air. But in case it’s not, she’s here so I’m inclined to believe her. We do what she says.”

“Thank you, captain,” said Susan sweetly.

“Look, you can do what you want to me. But spare my men.”

“I intend to. Come on I don’t have all day.”

And so the crew put things over their eyes, which Susan inspected, then opened a *Teleportal* in front of them. “Now walk and keep walking until I tell you to stop!” she commanded. The other end was back in the sub bay, maybe facing toward the wall, maybe facing towards the water? Yeah, it was the water. They shuffled forward, and when the last man was through she closed the portal before she could hear the yelp and splash as the first one fell into the water. (And her giggling, no longer kept in)

With that done, she opened the door, let the chamber flood, and swam through the wreck looking for the *Materia*. Once in hand she swam back out to the other sub, showed them she had it through the window (porthole?) and pointed up. They nodded, and Susan held on the sub bore her up and out of the water.

It was time to go cure Cloud!

Conspiracy to commit... keeping the world safe?

Time: About an hour later

Place: Mideel Hospital

The four *Huge Materia* floated around Cloud as though attracted to the energy that was inside him, and Susan readied the new spell. She had already purged half of it, the magic half, using her gun's *Imbued* spell of *Dead Magic*. Naturally the *Materia* and anything else remotely magical was moved far away, but now everything was back to normal. Only Aerith and Tifa were in the room with her, quietly watching as she reviewed the spell in her mind.

"Okay," she announced, "let's do this."

She visualized the spell symbols and magic swirled around the four *Materia* and Cloud. With a successful casting, energy shot out of him and into the crystals, each color going to the one it was most attracted to. He jerked upright as the energy burst forth from his chest, then sank back down and seemed to have gone to sleep.

"It's done," said Susan, getting absolute garbage on her *Spirit Sense* check. (An eight) Still, enough to feel the energy around her, and by focusing her attention just on Cloud, ignoring the *Materia*, she could tell he didn't have any trace of *Spirit Energy* inside him. The doctor, not entirely approving this odd treatment, gave him a quick examination. Not having any gave her a bit of a panic for a moment, fearing he was dead, but she remembered these people didn't have energy, they had MP.

"Heart rate steady, it was quite erratic before. Good pulse. Blood pressure normal. I think he's just asleep. He hasn't been sleeping really, since he got here."

"Okay. I'll secure the *Huge Materia* aboard the Highwind, and we can stay the night here. If he doesn't wake up normally tomorrow, I'll hit him with some healing magic and see what that does for him. If that doesn't work..."

"It will, I'm sure of it!" exclaimed Tifa.

Susan nodded, and started sticking the *Materia* in her *Pocket Dimension* to carry back to the ship. She didn't want them floating through town, after all. Sadly, she didn't notice the pair of eyes watching her as she did so, through a small gap in the wood that the house was made of.

Having nothing else to do, the group split up and wandered about outside, getting some XP. They had dinner, and again took rooms at the inn, as Cloud had yet to awaken. Susan had actually stepped through back to Aerith's house, and left the *Huge Materia* in her basement for safekeeping. There was a safe down there she popped them into, having gotten the combination from *Question*, one number at a time. That done, she came back and helped the others get XP.

That night, she awoke abruptly to find three men in the room with her, hard to see in the darkness because they were dressed head to toe in black. Their faces were obscured, and all held wicked looking weapons.

"Where is the *Materia*?" demanded the closest one. "You said you were bringing it to your ship, and the ship did not leave. So they must be there!"

"Huh? What?" Susan wasn't quite awake yet, having to delay 2d10*3 segments (or 48 in this case, amounting to nearly 10 seconds) "What's this now?"

The men looked at each other, then back to her. "The *Materia*. Where?"

"I can tell you," said Sparkle, jumping up on the bed. "But first, who are you people?"

"What trick is this?" asked one, pointing at her. "That cat spoke!"

"Some kind of robot, pay it no mind. Where is the *Materia*?"

"Are you *sure* you want to ignore me?" asked Sparkle. "Because if you do, you'll be sucking down *Somnolent Smog*." She took the full time to cast, a whole 1.2 seconds, and put in the maximum energy she could with *Spirit Manipulation*. She got a sixteen, usually more than enough to put down an NPC, who can at best roll a fifteen because you can't put energy into CON. They had *Vitality* and *Spirit*, but not CONstitution.

After some thought, the Narrator decided they had a 6 CON, giving them a chance to

overcome the spell. (After all, it would make the story more interesting if some succeeded, right?) Look at that, two did, leaving one to thud to the floor, asleep. Of course Susan with her 4 CON also couldn't succeed, and fell back asleep.

Well, crap.

"It's actually alive," said the one man.

"Take it down, it must be using some strange *Materia* to make this fog!"

Double crap.

Sparkle found herself in battle, facing the two warriors. She also lost the *Initiative* somehow, the two men rolling higher than she did, leaving her third in the combat order. On the bright side, Susan was apparently there with her, weapon out. She still seemed to be asleep though.

Oh right, sleep is actually a status ailment in this world. And she is technically in my party...

The other nice thing about this world was that Sparkle didn't take more damage from attacks here. Big or small, everything took damage based on the stats of the weapon and the person wielding it.

"Wind!" shouted the man, and she got knocked into by a wind attack, doing nine damage to her.

"Nine?" said the man next to him. "That can't be right."

"Who knows, just keep attacking!"

"Okay. Darkness!"

Again, she was slammed by an attack, this time for 6 damage.

Wait a second, what's this magic they're using? Our team doesn't have wind Materia, or darkness. I suppose there's holy damage, so the opposite of that would be dark? This is messed up. In any case, I need to wake up Susan to have any chance at all against these guys. Unless I want to play my Sacrifice card? No, I don't think so. Would my Awaken spell work on her now? I suppose I could use an item, I'm part of the party so I get access to the inventory. How would I apply it without hands though?

"Make your move, creature! Let us be done with this!" said the man.

"Give me a second. Sheesh. You going somewhere, buddy?"

Wait, I know what knocks people out of Sleep in combat. Physical damage! She attacked Susan, doing one damage, enough to knock her out of her slumber.

"What, huh?" she said, the soul of wit.

"We're in combat now!"

"Uh, sure? What?"

"Explain later, attack now!"

"Right. Dang, this is going to take forever!"

"You're telling me. They've already done fifteen damage to me!"

"You okay?"

"For the moment. They're using weird magic though, be careful."

"All right you two, you can still walk away from all this! Escape from this combat, and I'll let you go."

"Never. We will have the location of the *Huge Materia*. If not that, we shall destroy an inquisitive girl and her strange talking cat. Either goal is worth our lives."

"Suit yourselves. *Avatar of War!*" Susan cast on both of them, Sparkle becoming a slightly larger, armored version of herself, while Susan become the armored monster she was familiar with. Not that the flame and such would help, but it did double their HP, in effect. It also made them slightly faster.

However, as the battle wore on, each side discovered it couldn't really hurt the other. The pair even tried some spell they called "Ultima" which hit both of them, but which still did only twenty damage or so apiece. Both had healing magic, and while the goons didn't know Susan was reliant on Energy, they figured she was like them and had access to items.

"This is pointless, we should flee!" said the one man.

"Our mission is everything," said the other. "We must find a way to prevail."

"We can't. They're doing something, they have some kind of barrier up that prevents most of our attacks from getting through."

"But it must cripple them in turn, for they cannot hurt us either. Cast *Reflect* upon them so they can't use curative magic on themselves and we shall see how tough they are."

"But they must have items! And how will we damage them?"

"So let them expend them. We do as well! We will damage them with our weapons, of course. I will not hear another word from you about running!"

"All right! But soon they'll be able to use a *Limit Break* against us!"

I could, if you damaged me more than a little each time. But I think I still have a long way to go before that happens.

The one cast *Reflect*, which covered Susan with a green barrier for a moment, and she knew any magic cast on herself would be bounced back to the others. The other one then attacked her physically with his weapon.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Susan, now furiously thinking when it was her turn.

"What do you suggest? We can't exactly call for help in this crazy place."

"I know. I'm just thinking we might have to resort to methods we don't usually like to."

"You mean actually kill them?"

"We might have to."

"Isn't there some other way?"

"I don't know, we can't leave this weird combat without one side winning. Let me look at my book, maybe I can come up with something."

She took her action getting her book out, which she was glad worked, and let the man hit her again. She didn't even look up, as she started paging through and thinking about what magic she could use. Finally she snapped her fingers, "Of course!" She read through the spell, taking all the time she needed as they weren't going anywhere. She got a twenty and a fourteen on her checks, which was more than enough, and finally ended up casting *Damage Absorption* on the one guy, using maximum energy. She snapped the book closed.

"You can still run," she said, "because I don't advise hitting us anymore."

"I have no idea what you just did," said the one, "but our attack continues!" He swung at her, but his companion seemed to be wounded, not her. But even better, he seemed to take the full damage rather than the small amount she would have taken herself.

Undaunted, the man attacked as well, and wound up hurting himself.

"Now can we go?" he asked. "That obviously did something, and it seems we can't hurt her anymore."

"We shall continue to try!"

Susan just skipped her turns, as the one man took potions and such while beating himself to a pulp. She was still reading her book, not even looking at what the two were doing at this point.

"Okay, this isn't getting us anywhere either," said Sparkle, letting the guy hit her and get damaged instead. "Don't you have something else you could try?"

"Fine, we can keep doing this the hard way." She made more checks, and did more reading. That done, she cast another new spell from writing, dropping the *Damage Absorption* for *Shattersteel*, on both of them. The next time they were hit the weapon bounced off and took damage, and a few rounds later, both their swords had been totally destroyed.

"This is impossible!" wailed the one. "What is that book of hers? What is she doing to us?"

"I do not know. But I know this, we must retreat-"

"Oh, now we must retreat?"

"Yes, now. For now we have an even greater mission to accomplish. We must take news of this book back to our brethren!"

"Uh, I'm the only one that can-"

"Silence! We shall return!" With that, the man threw an item, some kind of *Smoke Bomb* and when it cleared, the two were gone. The third man was still sleeping peacefully on the floor of the place.

"Why didn't he join the combat like I did?" asked Susan, looking down at him.

"Maybe because I was on top of you when that guy brought us into combat? I don't

know about the rules here. Fighting without something to *Mimic* is terrible!"

"Yeah, you're telling me. I really need a way to do more damage around here. Oh well, let's see what this guy has to say."

She left for a moment, waking up Yuffie who presumably had taken rope tying classes, and gently levitated the guy so he could be tied up.

"Now what?" she asked.

Susan sighed. "More magic." She sat and read over the *Dominate* spell, making the usual checks to read and understand it. (Two 20s) She then cast it on the sleeping man, who couldn't make his RESolve check because he was asleep. She felt herself take control of him, and felt a bit dirty. *This is technically the Imperius Curse which if I was home, would be illegal. Of course mine wears off...*

"Wake up," she said, and the man did with a start.

"What I am?"

"Be silent unless you are answering a question."

The man went silent, his eyes bulging out of his head.

"Yes, you are now under my control. Now, answer all of my questions truthfully. Who are you?"

"I am brother Thaddeus," said the man.

"Good. Why did you come here?"

"I traveled here to kill you, because you asked too many questions about *Materia* that the brotherhood does not wish asked."

Yuffie gasped, putting her hands over her mouth.

Susan eyes hardened. "And the *Huge Materia*?"

"We have theorized its existence, but never created any. That takes a reactor, and even the Brotherhood cannot build a reactor without notice."

"Why steal mine? What's special about it?"

"Theory states that if many master *Materia* are brought near a *Materia* such as that one, they will be condensed into one and have all the functionality of the sacrificed *Materia*."

"And you learned I had some, and wanted it for yourselves. You were here to kill me, that was just a bonus for you."

"Yes."

"Imagine having all spells, or all Summons in one *Materia*. That would be fantastic!"

"Fangirl later, Yuffie. Working now. So you learned of me from the shopkeepers, right? That I was asking uncomfortable questions, and you wanted it stopped. So you came to silence me?"

"Yes."

"What is the brotherhood?" asked Yuffie.

"The Brotherhood..." Susan could almost see him trying to make a RESolve check to throw off the spell, but she had gotten a seventeen on it, and he couldn't spend energy. *Of course, if he has a 6 or higher, it's still possible.* "The Brotherhood of *Materia* controls all the *Materia* of the world, regulating the sale, raising, and use of *Materia* for all people."

"I knew it!" said Yuffie. "I knew it must be something. Here's the proof!"

"That's how your companions had things like *wind* magic, and *darkness*. You have *Materia* that aren't in general circulation."

"Yes."

"And why shopkeepers have only a few to choose from, but lots to sell. And where *Materia* that has been partially or fully raised goes when it's purchased."

"Yes. The shopkeepers are kept in line, but are not part of the Brotherhood. Only through a rigorous testing process can one be considered for membership."

"Well! That does explain a few things. Where?" *This will probably allow him to try and break out again, but cross your fingers.* "Where is your headquarters?"

He hesitated, but answered. "Hidden beneath the desert near the Gold Saucer. Only a few can cross it and survive. None have ever found the location."

"I can believe it."

"Can you get him to take us there?"

“Yuffie, I’m exhausted and low on energy. When I go to sleep the spell will be broken. I can’t hold him that long.”

“Come on, do you know how important this-”

“Stay here. Remain silent,” she told the man.

He nodded, and Susan dragged Yuffie by the hand down the hall.

“It’s in the middle of the desert,” she said, “there’s not going to be any sort of life around there.”

Yuffie’s eyes lit up. “You can feel it out! There must be a ton of *Materia* there!”

Susan nodded her head. “I’m sure I can find it without him, once we get a chance.”

“Excellent. It’ll be the raid of the century!”

“Something like that. Anything else we should ask him?”

“How it’s guarded, maybe?”

“We would go in *Phased* until we found the main vault anyway. There must be one. Traps or guards wouldn’t concern us.”

“Oh, great. Then I can’t think of anything else.”

They walked back into the room, and Susan looked the man over. She took off his mask, studying his face. “Closest to the desert I’ve seen is Corel town. If I left you there would you be able to get back to your Brotherhood?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Fine. Tell your Brotherhood it’s the end of the world. If there was any time to allow access to powerful *Materia*, it’s now. If they wish to meet next time as civilized people, I will discuss terms for access to the *Huge Materia* in exchange for *Materia* we don’t have. If they wish to attack me again, I will respond in kind. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Untie him,” she said to Yuffie, who did so.

“When I tell you, walk forward twenty paces.” She popped the mask on, but backwards, and also commanded him to keep his eyes closed for at least a count of 100. She opened a *Teleportal* to Corel and commanded him to walk, closing it behind him. She collapsed onto the bed, and was suddenly being hugged by Yuffie.

“I can’t believe this!” she exclaimed, completely excited. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

“I have some idea. Look, I’m going back to sleep. Being attacked in the middle of the night and having to read a bunch of spells over to use them because I can’t damage anything here makes me sleepy. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’m too keyed up to sleep. I’m staying here, if you get attacked again you’ll need me, right?”

“Suit yourself.”

“Great! Tomorrow we’ll- oh, well, see how Cloud is I guess, then go hunting *Materia*!”

“Yuffie,” she replied, yawning. “We have to wait until they get the message I gave that guy, then decide what to do. I won’t steal from them if they’re willing to help us. Maybe they shouldn’t hide *Materia* from the world, but maybe there are some that are really dangerous, like the *Black Materia*. We don’t know, and the system has worked until now.”

“You’re no fun.”

“I’m very fun. I’m also quite practical. And sleepy. Good night.”

“Night. See you... later today!”

“Ugh.”

Inside the dreams of a soldier

Time: The next day

Place: Mideel hospital

“All right, who had the party in the Highwind last night?” demanded Cid at breakfast the next day.

“Something wrong?” asked Barret.

“I’ll say, the inside’s trashed and my men got locked in a closet all night! That was closer together than any of them wanted to be to each other.”

“Sorry,” said Susan. “We had a slight altercation last night, some people were looking for the *Huge Materia*. I should have checked the Highwind, they did mention it, I think? I was sort of asleep at the time. Didn’t even think about it afterwards.”

“Where are they now, by the way?” asked Yuffie.

“I’ll tell you where they really are once we’re in the air again, too many ways someone could be watching us here.”

“Who even knows we have them?” said Aerith, “And what did they want with them?”

Susan explained about the *Materia* conspiracy and the Brotherhood, blowing all their minds. She went on about how they believed smaller *Materia* could be united using the power of their larger brethren. Their minds stayed sufficiently blown.

“And all this has been going on for hundreds of years?” cried Barret. “We could have used that power in the beginning, going up against Shinra.”

“Which is perhaps why they’ve kept it from the world,” countered Aerith. “Because they’re too dangerous.”

“You taking their side?”

“It’s not like they’re killing the land, like the Shinra did. And *Materia* are common enough, it’s not like they’re trying to horde them all. Just certain ones. And if people want to raise them, fine, but they can’t buy raised ones. I don’t like it, but I can see their point of view.”

“Bah, you would. When are going to bust them up?”

“Cloud first!” protested Tifa. “You said if he hadn’t woken up today you would try your healing magic on him!”

“And so I will,” promised Susan. “Right after I finish these delicious pancakes.”

And so she did.

And nothing changed.

She even had Sparkle try *Awaken*, which seemed to do nothing.

“That’s disappointing,” she said, looking down at his still sleeping form. “I can’t imagine what went wrong.”

“Maybe it’s mental,” suggested Aerith. “I mean your magic would take care of anything physical, right?”

“Yes, it would. You think he doesn’t want to wake up?”

“Keep in mind what he did just before he disappeared. In his mind, he may feel he betrayed us all by giving Sephiroth the *Black Materia*. He may not be ready to face us yet.”

“Then we have to somehow convince him he didn’t. He didn’t, did he?”

She looked back at the others, who seemed to be mulling it over.

“Nah,” said Barret. “Wasn’t his fault he got Jenova cells put inside him, right? He wasn’t acting under his own volition, so we can’t fault him for it.”

“I agree,” said Vincent. “I’ve done some things in my past I’m not proud of, but they were my choice. He didn’t have that luxury.”

“So the only question is, how to get in there.” Susan stood, tapping a finger aside her chin.

“Can you do it?” asked Tifa.

Susan shook her head. "Tricky. I have a spell, I developed it to put my soul in someone else's body so I could basically expel another soul that had taken up residence there. It worked okay."

"Then you can use it here!"

"Not so fast. I had a ghost friend who would ferry me around, as the soul just kind of floated there. I haven't seen many ghosts in your world."

"They do exist though," said Aerith. "And we know where to find them, too."

"What? They do? Where?"

"The train graveyard in the slums of Midgar. I wonder if one could be convinced to help..."

"You want to ask a monster to help us?" asked Barret. "That's crazy."

"What option do we have?" Tifa asked angrily. "If it means taking a risk or whatever, I'll do it."

"It's no risk, those things are pretty weak. It's getting one to talk and trust you that's the problem. Normally they just attack."

"I'm not worried about it trusting us, I'm worried about us trusting it. This is my soul we're talking about here, people."

"If you can cast the spell on two, I'll share the risk with you," said Tifa.

"You would have to come, I think. I wouldn't be able to access what I was seeing. You know Cloud a lot better than I do, so you could make sense of his inner landscape."

"Glad I volunteered then."

"So we're heading to Midgar?" asked Barret. "Great. Didn't really want to see that place again, let me tell you."

"You can stay and watch Cloud if you want, in fact as I can't maybe you better."

"Yeah, okay. I'll watch him. Won't nobody mess with him while I'm around!"

"Okay. Everyone else, back to the Highwind. Doctor, we'll return soon!"

"With a ghost?"

"That's the hope."

"I must say, I wouldn't have followed this treatment plan. I hope it works out for you."

"Me too, doctor, me too."

And so the group stood before the gates of Midgar, locked against reentry.

"You can just *Teleportal* us through, because you can see it, right?"

"Why take all that time? *Unlock*."

The doors creaked open.

"You're just full of surprises," remarked Vincent.

"Got that right. Hardly get to use that spell, too. Nice to get some use out of it."

Probably because I'm not wandering uninvited into every house in sight. Still don't know how they get away with that.

Aerith stopped by "her" church, and assured the kids that had taken over watching her flowers that she was okay, and would one day return. She thanked them for watching over the place, and gave them some *Gil*, as she was quite wealthy now, even split as many ways as the party would split their money. The group visited some of their old haunts, even getting a weapon for Tifa and visiting the shops there. Susan stopped to pay her respects to those that died in the pillar incident, and of course some parts were full of monsters so they had some fights, too. *Can't go anywhere in this world without some fights!*

That done, Yuffie, Aerith, Tifa, and Susan made their way to the train station, where they entered the eerily lit "train graveyard." As usual, there were some weird looking things wandering around there, like a horse looking machine with wheels, "ridden" by a figure in a white hood.

But then three ghosts appeared. They were the classic model of a ghost, looking like a sheet draped over a balloon. They had eyes and a mouth, and a long sort of tail that was as long as they were tall. They even had spindly little arms, and red hands at the end.

Okay, Myrtle they are not.

Tifa stepped up but did not attack. "Ghosts, please do not attack! We only wish to speak to you!"

A look seemed to pass between the three, and they vanished.

"Please, don't go! I'm serious, we need your help."

They reappeared, still looking confused.

"It's true," put in Aerith. "We will not attack you, please hear us out. This concerns something you can do for us, and maybe we can do you a favor in return."

They vanished again.

"Aarg, what do we have to do to get you to listen? Please, it may be a matter of life and death. We can only turn to you in our hour of need."

The reappeared. The lead one looked back at the other two, who sort of shrugged. "Death?" it croaked.

"Yes. We need you to move a soul into another body, so we can talk to him and wake him up. It's complicated, I can show you much easier than tell you."

"Reward?"

"Yes, anything we can grant you. I don't know much about the wants of ghosts, but if we can help you with something..."

"Life!"

"You want to be alive again? Gee, I don't know..."

"I do know a spell to put a soul into an object or a body," said Susan, also taking a step forward. "I suppose we could find someone recently dead, heal the body, and put your soul in. You are souls, right? I mean I thought people were supposed to return to the *Lifestream* around here."

The lead ghost gestured to the other two, and the three went into a sort of huddle. Finally the two drifted away from the battlefield, leaving only the one.

"This is all very irregular," it said.

"You can talk!" said Aerith, clapping her hands together.

"Of course. I'm a ghost, not a lamppost. It's just not done, you know? Never thought I would be talking to people like you, rather than fighting. So what's this about your needing my help?"

"Will you come with us? It really would be easier to show you."

"Wait, you want me to leave combat and show myself in the wider world? That's just not done, lady! Who are you to even suggest it?"

"I'm not your average girl. So you can do it? I always wondered where you guys all were until someone bumped into you."

"Yeah, well, same goes for us. Imagine, minding our own business and then someone smacks into you. Then the blades and the guns and the magic come out. I mean honestly, some of you people just run in a circle and take out dozens of poor, innocent creatures an hour. What's the point? Why do you bother us so? What did we ever do to you?"

"Wow, a ghost that wants to talk philosophy," said Aerith.

"We don't have much else to talk about. Not much interest in the stock market when you're *dead*."

"Anyway, can you help us or not?"

"Eh, beats hanging around here, I guess. Lead on."

The battle dissolved, and the ghost was standing with them in the train graveyard, looking expectant.

"So you could show yourself. If you monsters don't like being attacked, why not just reveal yourselves so people could walk around you?" asked Aerith.

"Because... um... Well I don't know. Ask the guy who made the rules!"

"Right. Susan?"

"Opening now."

Susan opened her *Teleportal* back to Mideel, where the airship was headed right after they got dropped off. They stepped through, and the ghost floated through after them.

"Hey, you actually found one?" asked Barret, looking the ghost over.

"He's not agreed to help us. Finding one was the easy part, they're all over that place," replied Tifa. "You know that."

"Sure, but getting one to help. Huh. Well, sure, why not? Susan likes turning our world upside down, a few more turns won't hurt. Maybe it'll start spinning in place and throw *Meteor* off on its own."

"We can only hope," said Aerith.

They took him to see Cloud, and explained what they wanted the ghost to do.

"Just stick your souls into this guy, and when they pop back out again, shove them back in the bodies? I guess I could do that."

"No tricks?" asked Barret.

"No tricks. But like I said, I want a body myself. I want to be alive again."

"Doctor, anyone died around here recently?"

The doctor was busy peering at the ghost, and it took a second before he realized he had been asked something. "What? Dead bodies? No, and you wouldn't want any around here, they would have died of old age. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

"Spend some time like this, and you'll see what you're willing to accept."

"What about a body like mine?" asked Cait Sith. "Does it have to be alive?"

Susan shook her head. "No, it can be an object. If that object happens to be a robot body, it would work."

"That seems even better," said the ghost, considering. "More sturdy. Very well."

"Then I'll get out the spell."

"I'll have a body put outside Midgar," said Cait Sith. "You can just grab it with the *Teleportal*, right?"

"Sure."

"Won't even take that long, we've got a few sitting around. Just a second, I'll go put in the request." The doll went dead.

Sparkle stepped up. "Guess I'm going too, huh?"

"Actually, I'm leaving you the book, and would feel better if you stayed here. If this goes wrong, you're the only one that can fix it. You can have the book make a spell to put us back, or use that *Soul Transfer* spell to get us out. I don't know what would happen if more than one soul was in a body, but maybe you could target a specific one?"

"That might be for the best. Okay, I'll keep an eye on you."

"Thanks. We don't even have to do *Freeze* like we did before, as the book says taking the soul out doesn't kill the body. Hopefully this should be an in and out thing."

"I'll give you... two hours and then start looking into solutions."

"Fair enough. Wish us luck."

So Susan cast the spell, and the next thing she knew she was looking at a fragmented piece of pavement, rather than the blackness she was expecting. Three paths led off in different directions, each with a Cloud sitting at the end of it, while a large Cloud hovered overhead. Past that, planets, stars and even nebula were seen in the distance. Tifa stood next to her.

"Is this what you expected?" she asked in a hushed tone.

"Last time I had to think about various things, and they appeared. Everything stood for something else, like a chain meaning the bonds between friends. This is a bit different. Do you know these scenes?" She pointed.

Tifa nodded. "They're memories of his past. We went to Nibelheim, remember?" She pointed off to the right, and it was true, that was the entrance to the village. "I guess it's time to confront the truth. Seems the right venue for it. Come on."

She headed off to the right, and Susan followed.

Tifa took Susan through Cloud's memories, finally admitting all those years ago that it was the man with the black hair, a man she called Zack, that had come to Nibelheim that day. They explored his childhood, and a scene at a well where Tifa and Cloud made a promise to each other. Cloud then recalled how it was he knew of events there, it was because he was

one of the two regular soldiers that had come that day. He found the strength to throw Sephiroth into the reactor pit, and with that his memories of the events ended. Susan could fill in the blanks from there.

He had been found by Hojo and revived, but changed. He had Jenova cells put inside him, and possibly Zack cells as well, to make him stronger. That's when he started hearing the voice of the Darkness, and how it came to control him.

Susan then showed him parts of her struggle. How she lost control for a time, becoming ever more arrogant and running over everyone with her magic. She showed him how Luna had come into her life, and shown her a better way. Then came the voice, and the uncertainty that her will would ever fully be her own again.

"I understand," said Cloud at least, having reintegrated himself. "Seems we both have a ways to go before we'll really know ourselves."

"But we will, won't we?" asked Susan with a grin.

"That's right," he replied, brushing his hair like he did. "Thanks, for helping me to understand. Now, exactly where are we?"

"The bigger question is, how do we leave?" asked Tifa, but that was soon answered as the space around them started shrinking and getting darker.

"I think you're waking up. See you on the other side!"

And Susan opened her eyes.

She saw herself.

Then she was being hugged by Cloud. "Uh," the her over there said. "What?"

"Is something wrong?" asked the ghost.

"Why am I over there?" Susan? asked.

"Ah, I did wonder about that," remarked the ghost. "But you all didn't seem that concerned, so..."

"What's happened?" asked Barret, as Cloud pulled away, looking at Tifa? with concern.

"We got put in the wrong body," said Susan, looking around. "Is that what I look like from the outside? Huh."

"My boobs *are* enormous!" said Tifa. "No wonder people stare at them."

"Yeah, how do you cope?" Susan gave an experimental bounce.

"Uh, you can fix this, right?" asked Cloud, looking between the two girls.

Susan laughed. "Yea, just let me read over *Soul Swap* and we'll be back in a jiffy. Then I have a promise to keep."

So, once back in her body she opened a *Teleportal* to the gate of Midgar, and there was another stuffed toy body for the ghost. She used *Soul Transfer*, (for 15 minutes, mind you) and the ghost vanished. The body started to move.

"Hey, it really worked!" it said. "I have a body again!"

"Then it seems our business is completed!" said Susan. "Hey, if you ever run into a snow creature that can't melt, tell her I said hi."

"Sure thing. Think I'll head that way for a bit, see what I can see. See you later!"

The toy/ghost left Mideel, and the doctor stood rubbing his eyes, probably not believing he just saw all that.

"So much for medical school," he said bitterly. "I should just suggest any old thing, hey, find a ghost! Why not? La la la!" He went skipping off somewhere.

"Think he'll be okay?" asked Aerith.

"Ah, he'll be fine. Hey, we're back together! Cloud, how do you feel right now?"

"Hungry. When do we eat?"

So the group had a small "welcome back Cloud" party... which was interrupted by the arrival of *Ultimate Weapon*... who blew up the town.

“Dang it all!” Susan shouted at the wreckage of the town. The group had driven the creature away, but the town paid the price, and all the buildings were in pieces. “I was liking that place, you know.”

“Hey, are you hurt? Legs broken? Walk on your hands!” said the doctor, running about checking everyone. “Are you hurt? Broken arm? Perhaps a dolphin could lend you a hand. Are you hurt? Oh, that’s a nasty gash. Let me find A UNICORN to help you! Tra la la!”

“Are you *sure* he’s going to be okay?” asked Aerith.

“Reasonably?” answered Susan.

“Anyway, nothing more we can do here,” said Yuffie quickly. “Let’s get going before someone starts blaming us for all this.”

“I’ve told Shinra, they’ll dispatch a cleanup crew, start rebuilding the town,” said Cait Sith.

“More good publicity for the Shinra Corporation,” grumped Barret. “Just what the world needs.”

Cloud shook his head. “Anyway, you guys can catch me up on the way... elsewhere? Where are we going? I’ll probably have to fight some battles too, looks like you’ve all gone up a level or two.”

“We have an airship now!” said Cid. “We stole it! Sorta?”

“And don’t forget we got the Brotherhood mad at us,” put in Susan.

“And we got some *Huge Materia*,” said Yuffie.

“And a submarine. Do we have to give that back?” asked Barret.

“You guys have been busy...”

Let's Make a Deal

Time: A few minutes later

Place: Highwind

So Susan and the group told Cloud what he had been missing. Going into space, going underwater, getting *Huge Materia*, all that sort of thing. Once in the air, Susan shoed the operations guy out and told Aerith the *Huge Materia* was currently in the safe at her house, and gave her the combination.

"Memorize this, and destroy it," she said, handing her a piece of paper.

Aerith started staring at it, and Cloud, having gotten caught up, wondered what to do next.

"Still some time before the cannon is moved. Though I can see now on the map here that Junon isn't actually all that far away from Midgar. They can just float it over there. Lifting it into place is going to be the big challenge, I expect."

"Anyone have any ideas about what to do next?"

"Clean out the Highwind," said Cid, dumping a bunch of trash in a bin. "Those Brotherhood goons really searched the place high and low."

The group gave a collective shrug and with the exception of Yuffie, who was feeling nauseous again, they straightened the place up. Susan had to do some *Repair* magic on panels and things that had been busted, but soon the place was nice and clean again.

That done, the group, rather predictably Susan thought, voted to keep raising their levels until the time came to assault the Northern Crater again. So they spent the afternoon traveling the world, looking for the place that had monsters which gave the most XP and AP. As they started to get worn down and hungry Yuffie insisted they head to the Gold Saucer to spend the night.

"You haven't seen the inside of that, have you?" she asked Susan.

"I suppose we might as well make use of that 30,000 *Gil* lifetime pass," grumbled Barret.

"How much?" asked Susan.

"Yeah, don't get me started. We wandered around killing monsters a fair time when we first needed to get in there. We had most of the money, and a day pass was only 3,000 *Gil*. But some argued the lifetime pass was cheaper in the long run, so a slaughtering we went."

No wonder these guys seem so strong, they've probably seen more combat than anyone in the world! And for weird reasons, I think, too.

So they parked the Highwind near North Corel, left the crew to guard the ship, and rode the skyway up to the Saucer.

Susan had to admit, the approach was pretty impressive. There were Chocobo races going on, what looked like tiny toy birds running on a track far below them. Lights, fireworks, music, the outside of the place lit up as they glided into the landing bay, and the guy in the Chocobo costume greeted them happily as they stepped out.

"Come on," said Yuffie, pulling her arm. "Let me show you around!"

"Guess we'll meet you at the hotel," said Barret, obviously not liking this place at all.

"Don't forget we're getting an early start tomorrow!" he yelled as the two jumped down a tube and slid to another area.

We are? News to me.

Susan and Yuffie checked out the whole place. They watched a short play, visited the arcade, and even took in a Chocobo race. They also rode the gondola, which was basically an aerial tour of the place and suddenly Yuffie leaned over and kissed Susan on the cheek. She looked at her oddly, wondering what that was about.

"I just felt like doing that," Yuffie admitted. "Like I was meant to kiss someone in here. Weird, huh?"

"Hey, I'm not complaining."

With all this going on, Susan rolled minimum on her *perception* check to notice the man watching her, and Sparkle had already retired, figuring she was pretty safe here. Both fell into bed far too late, exhausted and happy with all they had seen.

The next morning, Susan and Yuffie stumbled out of their room to find the others had left, leaving a note for them. Susan couldn't read it, but Yuffie said they were heading back to Mideel (what was left of it) because the creatures there seemed to give a bit better XP, and when they were awake to come join them.

"There's also a note from another man," said the weird doll thing at the counter. "Here you are."

Susan unsealed the envelope, and unfolded the paper inside.

Mysterious Girl,

We wish to apologize for our earlier treatment of you. Come to the food court outside the Wonder Square. There you will be met by a woman with a gift and an offer.

T.B.O.M.

"Could be a trap!" Yuffie cautioned.

"In public? I highly doubt it. Even if it is, I have a number one ninja on my side, don't I?"

"That's right! Let's go!"

So the two ordered... well, lunch, and sat down. Within a few minutes they were joined by a woman wearing casual clothes, and bearing a small, thin, box. She had long, dark hair, and glowing eyes reminiscent of Cloud.

"Ah, the Mysterious Girl, thank you for coming," she said.

"Wait a minute," said Yuffie, "I thought it was a *Brotherhood*."

"It was, in the beginning. What a shock it was for them, to find that women were just as capable as men in using *Materia*. Perhaps more so? I'm sure I don't need to tell you. But the name has remained. Does that satisfy? I do come baring proof..." She shook the box a little.

"And you wish to apologize?" asked Susan.

"Yes. Some of our more reactionary members, reacted, when they heard someone was traveling the world asking about *Materia*. They did not consider who that person was or what their goals were. We have since learned differently."

"And you found out you couldn't easily beat me. Those three person fights are tough, you can't really gang up on someone."

"Usually our *Materia*, plus high levels and stats see us through the majority of encounters. You have to go far to find the highest AP generating creatures, of course. Weaklings don't need to apply. But you sort of ignored all that, didn't you?"

"I work a little differently, it's true. I'm not exactly compatible with this world. Be thankful the other visitor you're hosting, a being locally called *Janova*, is equally incompatible. Otherwise we might not be sitting here having this conversation."

"Yes, that is part of why I'm here. We intercepted some interesting orders from the Shinra company about you and your group. Apparently, you're to help put a plan into action to save our world from Sephiroth and Meteor?"

"That's the idea."

"Splendid! It would be hard to use *Materia* if the planet has blown up. With that in mind, allow us to... assist each other, towards that goal."

"You want the *Huge Materia*," said Yuffie. "Too bad, it's ours!"

"Yuffie! Be nice."

The woman laughed. "You have good instincts, young lady. Perhaps I should recommend you in a few years, when your lust for *Materia* for its own sake dies down a little. No matter." She waved a hand in the air. "We wish access to the *Huge* variety, yes. I would not expect you to give them up without something equally valuable in return, and quite frankly

I can't think of anything I would trade for even one! So no, I am not here to try and convince you, as some would, that they would be best kept in our possession."

"Good. Carry on."

"As my note said, first, I wish to apologize for the attack. To that end, and as words alone are rather empty, I have been authorized to give you this."

She slid the box over, and Susan opened the lid. If you thought anything but *Materia* would be inside, you haven't really been paying attention. Susan briefly touched each one, getting a sense for them in that way people here seemed to have.

A Speed Plus. A Luck Plus. A Slash All, seemingly damaged? And a couple of generic ones, 2 Elemental, a Long Range, a Magic Counter, and an Added Effect.

"And all mastered, as far as I can tell. Except the Slash All, something seems off about that one."

"That one is rather curious. It seems to be unwilling to accept more AP. We've studied it for many years, and it is more a curiosity than anything at this point. A true Slash All would seem to evolve into *Flash Materia* over time, allowing one to dash forward and lightly strike all foes. Any that were hit instantly die."

"That would be tremendously powerful!"

"Indeed. And you can see why we would be hesitant to allow you that one, despite our desire for the... forgive me, for access to the *Huge Materia*."

"I can also see why they're all mastered. They have already fissioned once, and won't again."

"Correct. We are, after all, offering this apology to you, not you and anyone who might raise them."

"Of course, most of these are pretty common," said Yuffie, running her hand along them.

"You could always sell them," she suggested, "if you did not wish to use them. Some will fetch a high price."

"True. No magic ones."

"We observed her not using Green *Materia* in our earlier encounter. We thought perhaps she did not wish to, or was prevented from doing so because she used that other kind of magic, from her book."

"Close enough. I accept this as your apology." She stuck the box into her sub-space pocket, as it was only a couple of inches across. "Now I suspect you'll want to 'get down to business' as it were."

"Indeed. But first, the properties of the *Huge Materia* are only theory. If I could test the theory with a selection of Green *Materia* against the green *Huge Materia* I will know if that theory is correct. Then we may begin to bargain from a position of knowledge."

"I bet it's a trick!" Yuffie hissed, pulling Susan to the side. "Don't let her near the *Huge Materia*."

"We have to know, Yuffie. This may all be for nothing if she tries it and nothing happens. Plus, do you have enough mastered *Materia* to test it yourself? The end battle with Sephiroth is coming, if you can get some good *Materia* out of this it'll be a big help, right?"

"I... guess."

"And aren't you curious? I mean I have to see if this works!"

"Yeah, and it would take me years to get enough *Materia* to master level myself, you're right. I suppose if I switched over exclusively to double growth weapon and armor... Fine, but we better do it someplace else."

"I'm not just going to whip it out right here, you know." She turned back to the lady. "Sorry about that. We'll head to... Wutai. Would that satisfy you, Yuffie? She would be in your home turf."

"Oh yeah, forgot you could do that. Fine."

"Great. We'll finish eating and be on our way."

"I'm happy to wait," said the lady, and she did, quite patiently.

Susan found a quiet place and opened a *Teleportal*. The woman stared into it. "I would make a separate deal, and give much, to know how you did that!"

“And I could detail it to the smallest degree, wouldn’t help you in the least. It’s magic from another world. No one here but myself would be able to use it. Come on.”

Another World? She mouthed, but stepped through after Susan.

“All right, that’s your house there,” she asked, pointing. “Right?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, I’ll grab the green one and meet you there in a minute.”

“You got it.”

The two started off, and Susan looked for a good place. She chose the bar across town, and slipped inside. Of course, she had gone *Invisible* on the way over there, and the person behind the counter looked up as the door opened. She looked harder, but Susan closed it again and was still, so the minor distortion left by the magic wasn’t too visible. The woman shrugged and bent back over whatever she was doing.

Susan headed to the bathroom, retrieved the *Huge Materia* with *Retrieval*, and walked back to Yuffie’s house.

Set up on a table in the basement were a variety of *Materia*, and Susan was pretty sure they were all master level by the way Yuffie’s hands kept twitching towards them.

“It’s like showing a man dying of thirst a pail of water, and then dumping it into a flower garden,” she remarked. “Let’s do this before Yuffie forgets herself.”

“She’s passed the first test, anyway,” said the woman mysteriously, with a small grin.

Susan set the *Huge Materia* in the middle of them all, and waited for something to happen. It started floating on its own, and the smaller ones rattled and shook, finally starting to orbit the large one. Everyone’s gaze was transfixed on the sight as the marble like *Materia* swirled faster and faster around the large one, and suddenly there was a bright flash, blinding them all.

When they could see again, a single *Materia* floated there next to the *Huge* one, and the woman took it cautiously, as though it might be hot. Her eyes widened. “It did work. All those minor ones have been compacted into this one. See for yourself!”

She handed it over to Yuffie, who seemed surprised to be trusted with it, and took it gently. She nodded. “Every Green I know of, and a few I don’t. What’s *Contain?*”

“Some very powerful attack magic,” she answered, taking the sphere back. “Actually, no. This is part of my offer.” She handed it back. “We have been raising *Materia* a very long time. We have no shortage of master level orbs, generally going into making the 0 AP *Materia* for sale. To condense a fraction of them down... Our offer is this- Every fifth condensing we do is yours to keep, in each color. In other words the fifth Green, the fifth Red, and so on. We wouldn’t do four Red then give you a Yellow, for example. Consider this one a fifth, so we could do four more, then you keep the fifth again. Same for the Yellow and Red. We will give you the first of those, then every fifth as normal.”

“Every third,” countered Yuffie. The woman shook her head.

“On this I am compelled to be inflexible. These must stay rare in the world. But I know you cannot trust us, especially after what happened to you. Taking every fifth will keep a balance of power, of sorts. We will also pay 500,000 *Gil* for each session, with no more than three, of each color, condensed each session.”

“That seems reasonable, but I want something else as well. I want a *Materia* shop here in Wutai, run by my family, that can exclusively sell *Materia* that are above 0 AP. I mean it’s bizarre that no shop can do that. Let people pay through the nose for something if they want to. We run the shop, we buy and sell whatever comes along. You don’t get involved.”

“I suppose, given the buying prices we offer for master level *Materia*, most would be unable to purchase higher rated pieces in any case. Very well, as long as you do not undercut our prices, that is acceptable.”

“I’m happy then.”

“Do you want them placed here?” Susan asked. “Is there a secure enough location?”

“The Pagoda!” she answered immediately. “Someone coming in there would have to fight off all five masters, and that includes my father. If I can get an advance on that first 500,000 we can put in a good security system too.”

“We can have the security system installed,” said the woman. “Just show me where it is and I’ll put in the call. Shouldn’t we clear this with your father first, though?”

“Eh, I already beat the snot out of him, Pagoda is sort of mine now anyway. But sure, let’s do that.”

Yuffie’s father seemed quite pleased with the idea of storing and controlling the *Huge Materia*, and said the masters would fight with their lives to protect them. (They’d be paid well enough, he said part of each 500,000 *Gil* would go to them as the “security force.”) The woman seemed to believe him, and said she would have a company out in the next several days to install the system. Naturally, she would allow him to program any codes, so there was no trickery involved. He agreed.

“I’ll go put the *Materia* back then,” said Susan, “and get them to you in a few days when the system is in place. Then you can start condensing.”

The woman wrote up a contract, everyone signed it, and got copies. Susan put the woman back through to the Gold Saucer, and took Yuffie up on her invitation to check out the figures carved into the mountain.

They also saw the eternal fires in the cave, which got put out by the *Leviathan Scale* they had in inventory, surprising them both. They picked up an Oritsuru for Yuffie and an Added Steal *Materia*, which she knew Vincent would be pleased with. With this he could lighting something four times, try and steal four times, and then attack once.

Yuffie climbed to the top of a statue and started jumping and shouting into the wind, which Susan thought might be a little dangerous. Finally she hopped off.

“This has been the best day ever. We’ve put Wutai on the map again, do you realize that? People will come from all over to buy and sell our *Materia*, and we’ll get condensed *Materia* for nothing. I mean look at this orb! So shiny! And I can cast every spell from this sucker!”

“I know,” Susan said laughing, “I was there.”

“Come on, the others must be worried, let’s head to Mideel. Wonder if I should tell them...”

But she couldn’t contain herself, blabbing about the deal she had made, and getting rich in the process.

“Of course it’s all thanks to Susan,” said Vincent. “If she hadn’t voiced her concern about were all the *Materia* were, none of this would have happened. We would never even have known about the Brotherhood.”

“True. And you’ve all been a big part of my life recently. Don’t worry, I won’t forget you when the condensing happens. You’ll get rich too! In fact...” She popped the condensed *Materia* off her weapon and quite reluctantly handed it over to Aerith. “Here. You use more magic than I do, you deserve this.”

“What?” roared Barret. “Susan, did you put Yuffie under some kinda spell? Is this a Yuffie look alike? Did we come back from space with a shape-shifting alien that took her place? Or did she catch space madness? Did I catch space madness? Who are any of you people?”

Everyone laughed.

“I know, it’s not like me, but I’ll take the next one. I’m sure they’ll be coming there regularly.”

“Thank you, Yuffie,” said Aerith seriously. “I know how hard that must have been for you.”

“No you don’t, flower lady. No you don’t.”

They smiled and hugged, causing everyone to go “aww” and break into smiles again.

In the days that followed Susan put another four points into *Ninjutsu* and raised her new *Skill Group* to a three, all using XP from various other skills she possessed. (And were now at a two rating instead) They had tangled with *Ultimate Weapon* several times, searching him out with the Highwind to pay him back for smashing up Mideel. And of course to prevent him from smashing up anything else.

“For creatures created by the planet to help us, they don’t seem to be really helping us all that much,” remarked Susan as their weapons and spells cut into him for the fourth time. But finally he fell, dropping an interesting sword for Cloud and teaching Yuffie the Shadow Flare enemy technique.

Susan and Cloud both looked over the sword he had dropped. Susan was pretty sure outside this world she would never be able to lift it, but it had a curious property she wasn’t sure made any sense. According to what she felt when she held it, the attack power of the weapon rose with Cloud’s current HP level.

“Which seems backwards,” she said. “You would want the attack power of a sword to increase when you were *low* on HP, if anything. I mean your sword gets weaker as you do? That doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“I agree,” said Cloud. “If I’m in danger of dying, I don’t need my sword doing less damage to opponents, I need it to do more. And as I can’t switch out during combat, I think I’ll go with something else for bosses. Maybe I’ll have some kind of really cool sword made, that like splits into eight different blades and I can pull them out of the main blade when I need more than one. Then I could technically switch in combat, because it was all the same sword!”

“Uh, yeah, you... just go and do that.”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Cloud was staring off into space, imagining the *Limit Break* he could do with such a sword. He envisioned himself just floating in air, somehow dashing back and forth between blades. He wouldn’t even use *Materia* anymore, I mean that stuff was cheating, right? No, at the end of this battle with Sephiroth he would just take his *Materia*, lock it in a case and leave it where it could be easily stolen by any bum that wondered in off the-

“Cloud? You okay, buddy?” Susan was waving her hand in front of his eyes.

“Huh? What? Sorry, got lost in thought there. What were we talking about?”

They also checked out the *Ancient Forest* that got opened up when *Ultimate Weapon* got blown up, Susan’s magic of *Flight* and *Retrieval* serving them well, and negating the need to use frogs and such to progress and grab *Materia* that happened to be sitting next to odd, carnivorous plants for some bizarre reason.

I thought these things crystalized after Lifestream welled up out of the ground? I don’t see any cracks here, though I suppose they could be covered by the plant life.

The group spent much of the time getting XP, and with the cannon hooked up and ready to fire, Susan got the call to fulfill her end of the bargain with Rufus. Naturally they saved before they headed over there, just in case something should go wrong.

They were met outside the gates of Midgar by Shinra soldiers, and escorted to the office building where Rufus was waiting.

“Now keep your temper in check,” Tifa said to Barret. “He’s proven that the new Shinra isn’t the same as the old Shinra. We need him to bring that barrier down, so don’t start anything.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Susan put on some of the *Materia* she had been given by the Brotherhood, though at least the *Speed Plus* worked differently for her. From what she understood, the speed attribute for these guys determined when they could act in combat, not their own physical

speed. So her speed was now a 10, where naturally it was only a 7. So she walked a little more briskly, but that was it. Not that great a change on a world where combatants mainly just stood around waiting for their turn, but if she needed to run somewhere, it could help. Naturally the *Luck Plus* worked the same way, their luck seemed to determine when they got a "critical hit" and did double damage. She used it for a lot of things, like noticing stuff and not getting hit by projectiles. *Still, we'll need all the LUCK we can get right about now.* To that end she still had on the *Amulet* which was raising her LUCK by 10, so that was currently her best stat. (At a sixteen, the *Luck Plus* worked on her normal LUCK of 4, raising it to a 6, then the *Amulet* raised it by 10. The other way around would be too cheesy, even for this Narrator.)

She kept *Sense* and *Mimic* from before, but skipped *Slash All* for the moment. *After all, I can't directly hurt anything anyway, so doing 1/3 of nothing... to more combatants, is still useless.* She had on the *Minerva Band* they had picked up from the forest, protecting her from fire, ice, "gravity" and holy. *If I'm getting hit by a holy attack... from a monster... something is seriously wrong.* And of course she had the regular smattering of *HP Plus* and such, so she felt ready for anything.

"Welcome," said Rufus, after a seventy floor elevator ride to the top of the Shinra building. "It seems today is the day!"

"So it seems," said Susan. "And you're sure this'll work? I don't want this thing blowing up the city below."

"The theory is sound. Of course I've locked my greatest scientist, Hojo, in the cells a few levels below us for his part in all this. We'll figure out his punishment later. But the others assure me the gun will fire and if Susan does her part of delivering the blast directly to the barrier, that should knock it down. If it fails we have no other options and our world is forfeit. By the way..." he paused. "Did you do something to that rocket? The explosion that resulted when it hit *Meteor* was a bit more intense than we had predicted. We were watching it through telescopes and everyone who was looknig at it was nearly blinded in that eye! They just wanted to know the cause."

"Yeah, I gave it some Susan Special Sauce while I was up there. Hoped it would take the thing out, but Sephiroth just put it back together and kept moving it towards us."

"Ah, I see. Thank you for the attempt. That information will ease their hearts greatly, they thought maybe the rocket fuel had changed over time or something. I trust the *Huge Materia* have been helpful to you in some way?"

"They're more a long term thing, but yes."

"Very good. Well, this is no social call, shall we go over the operation?"

"I see no reason why not."

The plan, as Rufus outlined it, was that the group would head in while Shinra soldiers secured the passageways behind them. This was in case Sephiroth tried to escape. He could at least be slowed down until the party caught up with him.

"And why can't you guys go in first?" complained Barret.

"My good man, reports place you doing nothing but raising your levels for at least an entire week. What level are you now, 60? 70? My soldiers are nowhere near that good, plus I'm sure in your travels you've found some special equipment we wouldn't have access to. That reminds me." He called down to someone, and they brought up some weapons, dumping them on the table.

"Does any of this interest you? My weapons people called this one Missing Score, and I believe it would fit your prosthesis well, Barret. And for Vincent, the Death Penalty. I think you will find it to your-" He stopped as Aerith reached for a gun as well.

"What's this one?" she asked.

"Uh, that is the Outsider. Aerith, are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable with a staff? We might be able to find a good one around here somewhere. I assumed you would be more in a support role, not looking to directly attack."

"All things change," she said sadly, looking it over. "This one will be fine. The attack isn't quite as high as the Supershot ST, but it has two more slots and the magic raising is almost as good. I'll try it out and see which I like better."

“Oh, um, of course. You’re welcome to it, of course.”

Yuffie took a weird circular weapon called the Conformer, and Cait Sith got the HP Shout (another weapon that raised attack with current HP, so odd).

“Now, do you want to head there and then have us fire the cannon?”

“We think we’ll just stick around here, just in case,” said Barret, affixing his new gun and transferring the *Materia* over to it. “Then we can all go over together.”

“Very well, I know you don’t trust me so that’s fine. We have troop transports ready to go once the barrier is down. Actually it may be safer here, who knows what kind of energy discharge will occur when the barrier drops.”

“What’s to stop him putting it up again?” asked Cid.

“Ah, good point. We will have to hope he is too focused on *Meteor* at the moment. If you like, consider this a test run. We can always fire again, and be closer to the target the second time. It would take him time to generate a new barrier. We can slip in before that.”

“Fire again? Doesn’t that thing use Mako? You’re still killing the planet!”

“To save it!” counted Rufus. “Some sacrifice will have to be made, before we can start fixing things.”

Barret started to retort, but Susan held up a hand.

“Why not just save before we fire?” asked Susan. “We’ll have worked everything out before that and be in position. If it doesn’t work we’ll just try something else.”

“An excellent idea. You’re heading back outside Midgar anyway, before we begin the power up sequence, you can save one final time. If something happens, go back and we’ll abort the shot until we know what went wrong.”

“Sounds good to me,” said Cid.

So the others went back to the Highwind to wait, and Sparkle put *Flight* and *Acceleration* on Susan. She headed out the window to the end of the gun barrel, listening to the small radio transmitter Rufus had given her.

“Output at 70%, rising steadily!” she heard.

Okay, showtime.

She made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a 13, which wasn’t bad. She then channeled that energy into her *Mercury* check along with her normal 10, so her rating in *Mercury* was 28. That allowed her to open a pretty big *Teleportal*, which she fitted over the end of the gun. The other side was open to the barrier, (not too close in case of backlash) which she had gone to see before they made their way to Midgar.

“80%”

Energy started to glow around the end of the barrel, and Susan, now safely flying out of range (straight up) couldn’t resist making a power up noise in the back of her throat. “KAME!”

“90%”

“HAME!”

“100% Firing!”

“HA!”

The cannon blasted backwards with recoil, and a tremendous surge of energy shot from the barrel. She was in a position to see through the *Teleportal* and it struck the barrier with an unheard of force.

The barrier went down.

She was dancing in mid-air when she noticed (*thank you higher LUCK*) something coming out of the sea near Midgar.

Another Weapon! It must have sensed our use of Mako and come to put a stop to it. Crap!

The monster unleashed a blast of energy towards Midgar and Susan helplessly watched as it slammed into the city, destroying a portion of it, and the tower she had just been in.

“Go back! Go back!” she shouted. “We’ll need to evacuate the city before we fire! Go-”

Sparkle put *Flight* and *Acceleration* on Susan. She was about to head out the window when the radio Rufus gave her crackled to life.

“Abort the firing, I repeat abort the firing!”

“What?” exclaimed Rufus, going over to his radio. “What happened?”

“*Weapon* is in the area,” explained Barret. “When we turn that cannon on it’ll come up out of the ocean and blast the city.”

“Can you hold it off? Or even take it out?”

“Before it attacks? Maybe. We took out another one, but that was after chasing it down several times. I think you better just evacuate the city before we start this.”

“I hate to lose the city, isn’t there anything we can do?”

“Actually, maybe there is,” said Susan, getting out her book of magic. “Give me a few minutes.”

She read over the spell of *Bolstered Barricade*, which made huge walls appear within range. These walls were not made of any one substance, like stone or metal, but had a DTR equal to Sun, which Susan would of course have above a ten for the casting. She could get a bunch of them, and if cast at the right time... it could work. She made her regular checks, DIF fifteen and got a seventeen and a twelve. She spent an XP to reroll, as that was pretty low, and got an eighteen that time. *Much better.*

Given it was a grade ten spell she created a *Spell Paper* with it, so she didn’t have to waste time trying to cast it in the field with energy bolts sizzling towards her.

That done, the party saved again, and repeated the steps from before. As they knew the *Weapon* was going to appear, they were standing right there and got it into a combat after the cannon fired. This only slowed it down, as after doing some damage to it the *Weapon* left the combat and turned towards the city again. It fired, and Susan let the spell go, creating twelve walls. Two deep, two high, three across. The attack blew the first ones away but the second one stopped it. *Man, that attack was OTR 10. No other way to bring those walls down apart from that.*

With the city safe, and *Weapon* seeming to hesitate because it couldn’t figure out where those huge walls had just come from, they reengaged it and took it out. *Well, Shinra will have a lot of work ahead of them, figuring out just what that creature was and how it did what it did. Or at least just to get rid of the body. That thing is huge!*

That done, Susan made her way back to the Highwind and the group flew towards the crater, ready to descend and save their world. Several Shinra troop transport planes followed.

The first part of the approach was an unstable area, with only a series of highly spaced apart rocks to stand on. Susan put *Flight* on those, like herself, that couldn’t make the jumps or didn’t want to make the attempt. Having gotten past those, they came to a narrow series of broken down passageways where breaks in the floor were the only way down. The random encounters were thick here, somehow fitting dragons, gargoyles and weird flying things into the passageways. The group descended for some time, finally coming to a more open area that went left and right.

“Which way do we go?” asked Barret.

“You have to ask?” asked Cloud. “We take all roads here. Who knows what sort of creatures, treasure, and XP we can get down here? We’ll need every scrap in our final battle.”

“You want us to split up?”

“What? No. That would be the worst thing we could do. We stick together and see this through to the end.”

“Should have known. Left or right first?”

“Right. Come on.”

They followed a spiral path down a large column of rock, and then over top of what looked like the skeletal remains of some giant creature.

“Glad we didn’t run into this guy when it was alive,” remarked Yuffie, looking it over.

This path netted them nice armor and opened up to an area the group was sure the

other paths also led to.

“Down or back up?” asked Barret.

“Like I said, we leave no stone unturned in this place.”

The group went back up, finding that the path split again, but probably looped around so they took the left one at random. Here they found some weird plant life, and some actual water they had to wade through to get to the other side. It was quite pretty, Susan thought, and netted them a *Counter* and *W-Magic Materia*. The *W-Magic* apparently allowed two spells to be cast at once, and giving that to Vincent meant he could cast *Lightning* eight times rather than just once every turn. *Counter* was another one Susan was pretty sure would only work on this world- it allowed you to counter attack after being hit.

“Rather late to be useful,” remarked Yuffie, handing it back to Cloud, who put it onto his armor. He was using double growth armor, but his zero growth sword to try it out.

And then they ran into the Magic Pots.

They didn’t seem to fight back, but neither did they take any damage no matter what the group did to them. All they did was cry for *Elixir*, a healing item the group didn’t have many of.

“Oh, just give them one so they shut up about it!” said Vincent, currently in the lead team with Yuffie, Cloud, and Susan. Susan threw one and Yuffie threw one on her turn, then they waited.

Nothing seemed to happen.

“Great, now what?” asked Cloud.

“I’m going to try lighting again!” decided Vincent.

“You’ve already hit them like sixteen tim- you know what, go for it.”

This time they took damage, and were destroyed. As the battle ended, Yuffie gave a yelp of surprise.

“Did you see how much AP they just gave us? A thousand! That’s two thousand AP for my double growth armor! How many *Elixir* do we have?”

“Only a few, and we can’t stay here too long. Tell you what, I’ve got that triple growth sword, and Susan can transfer AP, everyone put on double growth stuff and we’ll see if we can’t raise the really important ones, maybe get a second *Counter* or something.”

They spent an hour, by Susan’s watch, wandering around and looking for Movers. Magic pots were nice, but the Mover enemies, of which there were always three, gave far more AP than even the pots. They looked like rubber balls that kind of bounced around, and as long as you killed one, they couldn’t do their triangle attack thing and were generally harmless. The best part- they didn’t need *Elixir* thrown at them to be damaged.

Susan had traded her mastered *Materia* for others, and the group was in good shape when they ran out of *Elixir*.

“I won’t do it now, unless you want another *Mimic*,” she said, “but after this is over, I’ll transfer AP to this *Mimic*, get it to fission, so I can take the mastered one. I’ll need my energy for further down, or more important ones to you if you think you can make them fission right now.”

The three looked at each other. “I don’t know, we’re doing close to 9999 damage as it is. We’re getting sixteen lightings every round with you *Mimicking* Vincent, how much more damage do we need to do per round?”

“Well, whatever you want.”

“No, we’ll each stick to what we’re doing. This is working well so far. I mean we have an extra party member, so we’re already ahead of the game. And we could always come back here with more *Elixir*, once we’ve defeated Sephiroth.”

“I know I am,” remarked Yuffie. “Okay, lead on.”

They then went through a series of rocky ledges, beside a *Lifestream* fall, which Susan found to be quite pretty. Especially because of the contrast it provided the dark stone in this area.

That finally led back to the area they had entered from, leading further down into the planet. Looking down it was just a weird, greenish glow and a bunch of rocks that seemed to be suspended on nothing. Cloud used the *Save Crystal* they had picked up in the first treasure chest near the entrance, and the group saved.

“At least now we know how the things are made,” said Cloud. “I always did wonder.”

“Yeah, me too. I just hope that wasn’t the last one in existence!” said Aerith.

The group chuckled, then got serious again.

“Everyone, last chance to check your equipment, *Materia* and items,” said Cloud. “It’s been an honor to know you all, and I want to thank you for coming with me on this journey. I know I’ve done some dumb things, and even turned against you a time or two, thanks to the Jenova inside me. But now it ends. We’ll battle Sephiroth and make sure our planet stays safe!”

They all nodded, equipped the best armor and weapons they could, distributed the *Materia* they had so it was all used up and each group people wanted to be in had at least one *Summon*, a cure, some kind of barrier magic, *Haste*, the works.

With that, they jumped into the pit and the final battle began.

This Isn't Even my Final Form

Time: Several Minutes Later

Place: The Heart of the Lifestream

The journey down was short by tiring. With each suspended stone platform the group leapt upon, it seemed they had a chance to fight a really tough enemy. But even the piece of *Jenova* they found at the bottom was hardly a challenge, and they slaughtered it without any trouble.

"Come on, Sephiroth, or the Darkness, or whatever it is you call yourself!" Cloud yelled, waving his sword about. "End this!"

"Very well," said a voice, and the form of Sephiroth appeared before the group. "If you wish to foolishly combat me, I will allow it. Hello again, Susan."

"Good afternoon, Darkness. I won't make the same mistake as before, by the way. I'll make sure I'm in combat with you before I do anything. And I have to wonder if my father's skills can protect you against *Materia*?"

"Oh, can you use *Materia* now? How did you get MP? Never mind. My *Meteor* approaches the planet, and soon I shall absorb all the energy of this world. I won't even have to lift a finger to rid myself of the other Paragon thorn in my side. What a delight."

"Enough talk," growled Cloud. "Attack!"

The world changed.

When the battle began, Sephiroth was changed. He was no longer even remotely human looking, standing at least four times as tall as they did, with his lower half hidden behind some kind of draping. His arms were massive and ended in a kind of reverse wing, with the "feathers" on the inside rather than the outside. He had horns, and a funny person on his head, which quite frankly looked a little ridiculous.

"What did you do to yourself?" Susan asked, waiting her turn. "Do you have person growing out of your head now? How does that work?"

"Being here has changed me, true. Don't despair, little ones, your pain will be over soon."

"Oh please," said Susan, "We've beaten bigger things than you. That doesn't even mean anything in this world. Slice him up, would you Cloud?"

"With pleasure!"

The combat was fierce, with each person standing motionless until it was their turn to attack. And attack they did, with blade or Lightning, in the case of Vincent. The first form fell, and Susan thought it was over.

But no!

Even as he vanished after being defeated, he morphed and changed, becoming a second form! His legs become six wings, and his right arm became a wing, and it seemed he had a sort of halo sticking out the back of him.

What, does he think he's some kind of one winged angel? Hey, that would make a great song title. Well, seven winged angel, I guess. But he's no holy creation, that much is clear.

"Oh, come on! Come down here and fight me like a man!" shouted Cloud, as the bizarre creature hovered over the battlefield.

"Perhaps one day, but not today," said Sephiroth, looking down upon the group with contempt.

He cast *Shadow Flare*, doing 6280 HP damage to Cloud, who went down on one knee.

"That all you got?" he gasped, limit bar filling. He then counter attacked twice, and Vincent blasted him with Lightning again and again. Susan hastily *Mimicked* it, hitting him with Bolt 3 sixteen times total.

"You shouldn't be able to do that," Sephiroth complained.

"Take it up with my union rep."

Yuffie summoned Neo Bahamut to smack him around, and Cloud healed himself.

"Easily enough countered," he said, putting up *Reflect*.

"Crap, I'll get it down on my next turn!" said Yuffie.

Cloud slashed into him, doing his maximum damage, and rather than wait Vincent simply shot him.

"Take this!" he said, swinging down upon Susan with his weird right... wing. It did eleven damage to her.

"What?"

"Don't know everything, do you?"

"You're only half compatible with this reality! I see how it is. That's why you aren't using your magic, you can't hurt me either!"

"Okay, maybe you do know everything. But they can! And they will."

"Clever girl. Very well, we'll see what happens on my next action."

Yuffie got the *Reflect* down with *DeSpell*, and Vincent got his Bolt 3 combo going again. Susan matched it.

"Now you'll see!" said Sephiroth, concentrating. Susan felt power coming from him, but nothing happened.

"Uh?"

"Wait for it!"

"Okay?" They waited. Seconds ticked by, then nearly a minute.

"So..."

"Wait for it!!"

"Right."

They waited another thirty seconds. "Ah, there it is. *Super Nova!*"

Somehow the sun exploded, but they were still all fine in the end, but badly wounded.

The group was down to less than a thousand HP apiece, while Susan took thirty four damage.

"That was a 4d10 attack at least!" complained Sephiroth. "How much HP do you actually have? Are you using *HP Plus* or something?"

"Why not use *Sense* and find out?"

"You think I'm carrying something that useless around?"

"Would answer your question."

"Uh, banter later?" asked Cloud, waiting for his turn.

"Oh, sorry. Go ahead."

"Thank you. Limit Break! Meteorain!"

"No!!!!" shouted Sephiroth, light bursting through his body as the rocks cleared. He began to break up, pieces of himself falling away. "I'll return one day, just you wait!" he managed, as explosions of light around his body took him.

And then he was gone.

The group waited to see if they would have to fight another form, but nothing else happened.

"Let's get out of here and take care of *Meteor*," said Susan, casting *Teleportal* back to the surface.

Once there, Sparkle put *Energetic Accumulation* on her and she looked up. The pieces of *Meteor*, now once again fused into a solid mass, were close enough to see now. She contemptuously cast the grade 2 spell of *Thrust* with all the energy she could muster. Her magic swirled around the rock and she turned away from it. "That's it, folks. We won."

"Uh, it hasn't really moved?" asked Cid.

"Give it a few days. Remember, it took a week and a half to get this close. You expect it'll just zoom away? 60 meters per second is pretty fast, but it's peanuts to space. Don't

worry, it's moving in the other direction now. I'll hang here a few days, take you back to that cavern with the Magic Pots if you want, just to be sure. But that's it. We won."

The group made their way to the Highwind, then radioed Rufus that the job was done. "Glad to hear it," he said over the noise of crashing in the background. "This area just got pretty unstable so we're pulling out. Meet back up at Midgar later and we can talk about our next moves."

"So we really won?" asked Aerith, still looking up at the *Meteor* as if she could see any change at this distance with the naked eye.

"We really did," replied Susan. "Your world is safe. As soon as I leave, the group that sent me here locks it off from The Darkness, and it can never return."

"So all we have to deal with is the Shinra corporation," said Barret. "Keeping them in line is going to be a pleasure."

"Unless you guys get turned into wanted criminals again," said Yuffie, kicking at the dirt.

"He wouldn't dare! Plus, you're a part of our little group, missy!"

"Eh, the Brotherhood would protect me. Without me, there's no access to the *Huge Materia*. So I'm untouchable."

"You hope."

"Come on," said Susan with a laugh. "Let's go to Costa Del Sol and celebrate!"

The people at the resort town didn't quite understand why these weirdoes were celebrating, but they didn't know what Susan and the rest did. They partied and lay out on the beach, and Aerith kept looking over at *Meteor*.

"You think it's a little smaller?"

"Stop worrying! He's gone, forever. You guys beat him with your own strength. I didn't even do much to help, on this world. This crazy, mixed up world. I'll miss it, and all of you."

"We'll miss you too, and your crazy, mixed up magic!" said Yuffie.

"Oh, it's crazy and mixed up, huh? And here I was, going to leave you an item you could use to open *Teleportals* like I do, so you could go anywhere. Like down to see the Magic Pots whenever you wanted to raise *Materia* without having to slog through the cave every time. But if it's too crazy I suppose you don't want-"

Yuffie jumped up and kissed her properly this time, cutting off her little speech.

She looked into Susan's eyes as they broke it off.

"Let me guess, you just felt like doing that?" she asked with a grin.

"I just couldn't think of another way to shut you up."

"I guess that's an acceptable way..."

So Susan hung out there for a little while. She transferred the *Huge Materia* to the new vault at the top of the pagoda in Wutai, and made an *Imbued* item for Yuffie to open *Teleportals*. It had to be permanent, due to them not having energy, but it worked just fine. She had the book analyze *Alexander* and figure out *holy* damage in case she ever needed it. And of course she transferred AP between *Materia* and made another *Mimic* for them, and Yuffie said she would probably start making more of them to sell pretty soon. As there was only the one she would have to sell the mastered one, leaving the fissioned one to level and sell. But it was probably worth it, given the rarity and effort of making them.

Susan transferred all of the *Materia* she was taking out of this world to her sub-space pocket so she could take it with her, but left the swords and armors in her *Pocket Dimension*. She was confident they would go though, as they were just regular stuff. She didn't know how *Magic Counter* or *Added Effect* would work, but the group had some of them so she kept them both.

Finally it came time for her to leave. Shinra scientists had confirmed that *Meteor* was moving off, not that any of them had an explanation for why. But news reports went out, and Shinra stock soared higher than ever, and Rufus promised them all a new beginning for the

company.

“Perhaps even some electricity generating techniques I totally thought of myself, using fire or lighting *Materia*?”

“You rat!” she said to Cait Sith.

“Sorry, I’m a bureaucrat. Reports are what I do, and I’m very good at my job. So that got in there too! If you want to stay around and sue me, well, Shinra already patented the technique so good luck winning in court.”

“Barret?”

“Yeah?”

“Kill.”

“You got it.”

“This body is just a toy!!!!!!”

And so, Susan was standing before the group, in the place it all started. She didn’t think she had to be here, but it felt right, leaving from the ancient city she had saved Aerith in.

“Thank you for healing me, and helping me find myself,” said Cloud, shaking her hand. “That voice that was inside me seems to be gone, so my will is my own again.”

“Of course. Now I just have to find myself and we’ll be even.”

“Keep working on that swordsmanship, and one day you might almost be somewhat near to half as good as I was a year ago.” They both laughed. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye,” said Aerith, hugging her. “I really hated you the first time we met. I didn’t understand, and I’m still not sure I do. But I’m going to use the life you left me well. I may be the only Cetra but that doesn’t mean I have to be the last. I’ll have tons of kids, and maybe someday lots of people will be able to hear the planet!”

“I hope so, Aerith. I think if more people could, this never would have happened.”

“I hope you find your friend, and your father.”

“Thanks. Bye.”

“Bye.”

“I’m starting up the space program again!” said Cid, coming up next. “The Ancients came from space, so there must be a way to cross that distance. We know the rockets work, and soon we might even put things in orbit to watch the planet and bounce signals around. *Materia* won’t work away from the planet, so it’ll just be pure science once we get out there. I’m sure we can make it work though. I’d like to see some of the other planets the Cetra have visited.” He gave a laugh. “Maybe one day our race will be called Ancients, because we’ll have visited other worlds and left seeds there.”

“You have the drive, so you’re halfway there, Cid. I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” said Barret simply. “AVALANCH won’t be the same without you.”

Susan nodded. “I’m glad your daughter lived through it all. Your work is done, go be the best dad you can be.”

“I will.” He looked away. “If my daughter is half the woman you are, I think I’ll have done well. See you.”

“Here,” said Cait Sith, handing Susan a stuffed toy. It was a tiny replica of his robot body. “Don’t forget us, okay?”

“I won’t. Hope you get promoted and keep Rufus in line.”

“I will. He’s already asking me various things, so I’m sure the future is a bright one.”

“Good. Bye!”

“I think some of my sins have been lifted,” said Vincent, also shaking her hand. “It was good, traveling with you. You see things differently, and you’ve been to other worlds. Like me, you have a monster inside you have to temper, and I think in the end, it’ll make you stronger.”

Remember our fight, when you confront the Darkness once and for all. Even if you stand alone, you're in our thoughts."

"As you will be mine. Thanks for your lightning. I'm going to miss mimicking it."

"Here, I know you can't use it, but at least keep one as a memento. I've got plenty of them now." He handed her a lightning *Materia*.

Susan grinned, shoving it into the pocket. "I will."

"Good journey."

"I've been inside you, but I really don't know you," said Tifa. "We found Cloud together, and for that I'll always be grateful. Without you he may yet have been trapped in his own mind to this day. I don't know what your magic is, but it works. I believe in it, and you. There is no doubt in my mind you will find your friend and rescue your father. I'm sure of it."

"Thanks, Tifa. When I do I'll tell them both all about my adventure here, and about all of you."

"It was an adventure, wasn't it. Stay well."

"You too."

"I feel there's much I could have learned from you," said Nanaki, padding over. "I know I mostly kept to myself, just watching the interactions of the group. I think I still have a lot to learn about people, and life. I'm only 48 you know. Maybe you can come back someday, see what this world has become? I'll be alive a long time, so I'll be keeping an eye out for you. You say time doesn't run the same between worlds, but don't hesitate to come back. Even if it's just me, this world will welcome you back."

"Thanks, Na."

And finally Yuffie stepped up. "I'm really going to miss you," she said, hugging Susan and crying.

"I'll miss you too, you crazy ninja. Thanks for the training, I'll keep my skills up."

"Traveling worlds like you do, I should think so! Here." She handed Susan her 4-Point Shuriken. "This is what my master gave me when I graduated. You haven't graduated, but maybe it'll come in handy sometime."

"Thanks. I'll keep it sharp. Maybe read over that spell to manipulate metal and add some more *Materia* slots, and think of you."

"I'd like that. Now get out of here."

"Goodbye, everyone."

"Goodbye!"

Susan found it a little hard to focus on the watch, her eyes were wet, but she opened the gateway back to the Hub and stepped through, turning one last time before it closed. Her new friends were waving and smiling, even those with tears in their eyes, and with a pop, the wall was blank, and she knew she didn't have HP anymore, but her standard Health Level.

"You did good," said a voice behind her, and she whirled to see Silverstreak standing there.

"Is this how my father felt, leaving my mother and me?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know your father's mind, Susan. But I'm sure he loved your world and you as much as you came to love that one. (I mean I take it you did, given your current emotional state) But come, chin up! You saved a world, and Darkvoid is forever denied it. I'll guarantee you that. Their lives will go on, and maybe even be a little better for knowing you. Don't you think?"

"It wasn't all one way," she said, gripping the weapon tightly.

"Nor should it be. If you learned a thing or two there, it was time well spent. Now, would you like to be alone awhile? I can offer you a room."

Susan looked at Sparkle, and considered.

“No, we have work to do. Best to get to it. Their adventure is over, but mine has yet to actually even begin.”

And so Susan looked over her *Character Sheet* and Silverstreak showed her to a lab where other magic users were working. She had 50 new XP to work with, and Sparkle had 30. They explained the procedure of *Imbuing* that would be needed to make her *Materia* work outside the world she had just left. She had spilled out of her sub-space pocket and *Pocket Dimension* all the things she had brought from the previous world.

“Basically,” explained one, “you have to do the full *Imbuing*, but as if the item was a charged item that had run out of charges. Have you ever done a charged item?”

Susan shook her head. “No point. Given the cost, time, and money put into it, energy or permanent is the way to go. I mean try and keep track of the times you’re going to use an item. I’ve used my *Legion* a bunch, I don’t even know how many times. Miscount and it’ll let you down, just when you’re expecting it to be there for you. And something like *Armor of Magic* I would really want going all the time.”

“Yes. I think that way of *Imbuing* was just so shopkeepers could sell items with a limited number of charges.”

Great, another shopkeeper conspiracy. Why not just sell Spell Papers, with Spell Symbol put on them. Faster, no XP or monetary cost...

“Anyway, it boils down to this; if you want the effect permanently, like your *Speed Plus* here, that’ll be 12 XP. If you want to activate with energy, like *Sense*, that would be 6 XP. Any new ones you want to make, say a fire one to use with that Elemental... it’ll be the normal cost. Though, now that I think about it, you could create one with just one charge... and never use the charge. Think it over.”

Susan opened her mouth to ask if they would link, but she was anticipated.

“Yes, they will link, so if you hit someone with an Elemental link weapon with a poison spell it’ll poison them by touch. No wait, that’s Added Effect, sorry. You get the idea.”

“I get the idea. Wait a second, if I had *Sense* on all the time, I could instantly know just by looking at someone how much health they had, and if they were weak to something?”

“Well, yes. For most things. *Sense* didn’t work on all creatures, did it?”

Susan sighed. “No, like the Weapons and bosses, and some regular enemies too. Okay. But what about the *Imbuing*? I would need a similar spell to *Imbue* into the object, right?”

The man nodded. “You may have to let your book analyze the *Materia*, it will have enough of that world’s energy about it to do that much. Some, like *Speed Plus* is just like *Augment Speed*.”

“I saw that one, it’s one of the new spells you guys put in, right?”

“That’s right. You’re familiar with *Augment Stat*, so that’s no trouble. *Long Range* would be a modified *Weapon Technique* spell, probably grade 2 because *Technique* is only grade four, and does more. *Magic Counter*, *Elemental*, those you would have to also have the book look into.”

“That’s fine. What about *Slash All*? I don’t relish doing 1/3 damage, even if now I’m back to normal amounts of health for people. But what’s the range on it? In the last world they dealt with small groups of enemies. If I was facing an army could I slash them all from a mountaintop?”

“You would have to see what the spell was, and it would probably be pretty high grade. It would be a better *Weapon Technique* spell, able to hit multiple targets. Can I see your book? Thank you. The range is M, and it says you can attack within M range. It would probably be the same for *Advanced Weapon Technique* or whatever the spell was called.”

“I guess. Do I take *Long Range*, so I can hit one person from far away, or *Slash All* so I can hit multiples?”

“If you were just facing one person, your magic could take them out more easily no?”

“Well, all of this is in preparation for worlds without magic, or without planets to draw from, like the first world I went to.”

“Ah. Well, one-on-one, your opponent will close on you anyway, so you would probably only get one shot to use it.”

“True, very true. I’ll think about it.”

“No rush!”

“Now, onto this other stuff. I notice my *Amulet* isn’t as nice now.”

He chuckled. “Yes, you may have noticed the extreme stats those people had. It looks like this is the only thing you brought back with a stat change? Basically anything like this, divide by 5. So you get a plus two while wearing it, that’s not so bad, right?”

“All things considered, no.”

“Now, the Crystal Sword is quite interesting, it’s actually OTR 8 having been brought here. The Enhance Sword is basically just a regular broadsword, so it’s OTR 5. You’ll have to decide which is better, given the *Materia* situation you want to use.”

“I think I’ll be able to put them all in the Wizard Bracelet anyway, so it won’t matter.”

“True. Now, about that. In the other world they had a *Magic Defense* stat. You’ll find this actually works similarly. It will shave a few points off if you get hit with a spell. Or make it a little easier to shake off. So keep that in mind. You can’t wear both the Minerva Band and the Bracelet, by the way. You might think you could, one on each arm, but only the last one you put on will work. Sorry about that, but they’ll interfere with each other.”

“Oh well, can’t have everything right?”

“You can only try. So, give some thought to how you want to spend your XP, and feel free to use the lab as much as you want. There’s a map app on your watch, details the whole place, you’ll find it. You can also just ask it to take you to your room and it’ll do that space bending thing where you walk through a door to another room entirely. When you’re here it’s connected to the local network, and the local computer power. So it can control a lot of stuff while it’s here. Just let someone know when you’re ready to start looking for Luna. We have several promising candidate worlds based on where you said you came from and where you were going, so maybe you’ll get lucky and find her in the first ten or so.”

Susan paled. *Ten... or so? And that would be “lucky?”* “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Thanks for everything!”

“Of course. Thank you for beating back Darkvoid. We all appreciate it. Saves us some work.” He winked.

“Eh, I just pointed the way, the others did most of the work.”

“You did the most important thing, way I hear it. Sent a big chunk of rock away before it could impact the planet. That’s pretty important.”

“Yeah, I suppose it was.”

“See you!”

So Susan got to work. She decided having the extra senses would be nice, so that was going to be made permanent. She had already asked the Mimic be analyzed, she knew that was a grade 7 spell. That could be really handy, and 7 energy every time? She would pay the extra 6 for that one. She didn’t need extra speed or being able to attack from a distance until she was in combat, and it was only 4 energy for the pair. The extra LUCK she could use all the time.

She got to work on the Mimic one while the book worked on Sense, having put a massive amount of energy into *Augment Skill: Imbuing*. Even with that, it took her some time to get all her XP spent, which she did. In the end she popped

Sense (Permanent)

Mimic (Permanent)

Slash All (Energy)

Speed Plus (Energy)

Luck Plus (Permanent)

into her *Wizard Bracelet*.

Man, 60 XP wiped out just like that. But I think it’ll be worth it. With Mimic and my Adaptive skill, if I ever get to use it, I should be ready for worlds without all the planets. Or at least combats I don’t have to throw energy around left and right to get through. And my LUCK

is now a 9, can you believe that? A plus two thanks to the amulet I got, and now another fifty percent raise from the Materia. That'll be nice, not that I make that many LUCk checks, come to think of it...

Sparkle put her points into the skills she wanted to raise, and learned a new spell or two on top of that.

Finally, Susan told someone at the Hub (and she had been getting to know the beings there, as she had been eating with them and such, they were all very nice) she was ready to go. They handed her a list of coordinates to punch into the machine and some notes on what to expect on each world. (They also showed her how to use the machine, duh)

The first one on the list had the following notes:

“Wait where you find yourself, someone will be along. Somewhat similar magic to your own, but with a twist. Not Paragons. Ask her middle name. Girl’s mother may soon die of cancer, leave an *Alleviation* spell with her.”

Huh. Okay, so they do similar magic to me, but don’t have character sheets? Guess that means it’s more like my world, but without wanded magic. That will be very nice, meeting some other people without that weakness. May as well see rather than speculate.

“You ready, Sparkle?”

“Ready!”

“Cross your fingers, Luna please be here!”

The two stepped through the light.