

Your Magic is What?

Time: About an hour later

Place: ???

Susan sighed again, looking around at the empty place she had found herself in after stepping through the portal. It was odd here, no real signs of civilization, at least in terms of roads or cities. Far down the hill there seemed to be a small church, white and wood and small. It had, for the past hour, been very slowly burning to the ground. The world here didn't feel right to Susan, to any of her senses. The *Spirit Energy* of this place felt odd, and there was hardly any magic to speak of. At least she found nothing out of place with her *Dimensional Senses*, but with only a three in that skill, she figured she would have to be pretty close to something in order to tell. She also heard the odd cackling laughter from somewhere she couldn't place, but she and Sparkle saw no one nearby.

While standing around she had a brainstorm, and got out her *Somatic Sword* pistol. She forgot to ask someone at the Hub about getting more ammo, but looking at it now it really had the same problem as her magic. It was limited, in other words. Ten shots, and then a lengthy reloading time, even with more magazines close at hand. Her sword might do less damage, but it could now hit more people in one action, and didn't need to be reloaded. Her magic could do more, but still would run out eventually. She wasn't sure *why* she was so worried about that, but it was a nagging in her mind, like she should try to become as unvulnerable as possible.

Her decision made, she had gotten out her book to look up the spell for severing the bond, then recast *Somatic Sword* on her Crystal Sword, instead. For fun, she also read over the new spell of *Material Link*. This was a Jupiter spell which would allow the sword to return to her hand should she lose track of it, or if it got knocked away. She could also feel the direction and distance to it, which was pretty neat. She then put it away, winced at the one damage to her hand, and stuck the gun in her *Pocket Dimension* in place of the sword.

*I'll have to ask Silverstreak if there's a way to transfer the Dead Magic Imbuing on the gun into an orb, so I could fit it into a slot. Far more useful that way. Or maybe he could crush the thing down to that size and I'll just pick up another gun from somewhere. Ammo is a problem, but I would still rather have the ten shots than not, in a pinch. Of course that was a specialty item, made to combat Tom. I wouldn't mind having that XP back to put into some other item.*

That done, she got bored again and gazed up at the oddly darkened sky.

"Wait," the man says," she said for the third time. "Wait for what?"

"And I thought I had *Short Attention Span*," remarked Sparkle, raising her head. "There must be some reason we're here."

"I know, I know. It's just the last world I swooped in, whoosh, saved someone right off the bat. This place... I hear shouting and see smoke but I'm supposed to wait here until someone comes?" She had, originally when she had arrived, decided to ignore those orders to wait and started down the hill. Her "watch" had buzzed and vibrated somewhat angrily, and a message popped up on the face. "Wait," it reminded her. So that plan was out. "What if people down that hill there need my help?"

"Oh, that's what this is about? You don't like doing things low key. Maybe the person we're waiting for will help you with the church thing? Remember Sephiroth, you couldn't have taken him alone, maybe it's like that here. The notes said their magic was similar, that means it's probably just as powerful as yours. Until you learn the rules here, you can't take anything for granted. You didn't even check to see if they had all the planets here!"

"I guess I should get in the habit of doing that. Low key. Loki. Odd language thing there, Loki is anything but low key. Or is he, didn't he usually do things by stealth?" Sparkle looked at her, tilting her head. "What? No, I don't, you know that. I mean I'm trying to not be too much of a show off but how can I help it? When I can do things others can't, it's hard.

Maybe if magic here is similar mine won't be so out of place, and it won't matter."

"Maybe. But isn't it more your attitude towards things than what you can do that's the real problem?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can open holes in the air, fly, turn myself into an armored warrior, ho hum." She faked a yawn. "No big deal. What attitude do you want me to have?"

"I don't know. Just remember, it seems these worlds have to be saved by the people that live there, you're just there to help out where you can."

"Which is right and logical. I see no reason to be upset about that. I just chafe at the thought that I could be helping someone right now rather than standing around."

"Silverstreak must know what he's doing."

"I expect- Hello?"

Without warning a confused looking girl had stepped out of nowhere in front of Susan. She looked a few years younger than her, with shoulder length brown hair and gray eyes. Their eyes met and Susan couldn't help but notice there was a pain in them, but a strength too. Like she had seen things that had scared her, but had come through them stronger. An understanding passed between them, *she's like me*, but then the girl's eyes darted about and the moment was lost.

What wasn't lost was Susan's knowing, beyond doubt, this girl's health and energy level, just from looking at her. She also knew she wasn't weak to any one element. *Guess I know the Materia work, and how that information is presented outside of Aerith's world. How about that? So cool!*

"It's about time you showed up," said Susan, taking a step forward with a grin and holding her hand out. "I was beginning to despair I would ever know why I was here. Name's Susan. Susan Felton. How are you?"

"I'm Nita, Nita Callahan. I'm on errantry, and I greet you." They shook hands.

"You're on... what?" Susan asked. She did a quick *Magic Sense*, and she wasn't sure if it was part now being a *Spirit Mage* or what, but a sixteen told her that yes, she had the spark. This girl was a magic user, though not of the same type she was. As Susan pulled her hand back, she also did a *Dimension Sense*, getting a twelve, and no, she didn't belong in this world.

"Oh, I thought you must be... well, never mind. Did you get stuck here?"

"In a manner of speaking. Oh, this is Sparkle, my companion."

"Hello!" said Sparkle brightly. "Can we leave here now, please? This place is really depressing."

"Another talking cat! So you're a wizard too?"

"Wizard?" Susan laughed. "Something like that, yes. Oh, hello there."

"What?"

Susan and Nita looked down to see a kitten had now come out of nowhere, and was looking up at them both. "The wind does blow, doesn't it?" it asked.

"You even have a talking cat companion! This is wonderful!" remarked Susan, feeling a strange kinship with this girl. She had clasped her hands and was looking up now. "I forgive you for making me wait!"

Her watch buzzed again, and there was a new message. "Accepted. Good luck." Susan fell to peals of laughter, and the kitten and Nita looked at each other like maybe her brain wasn't all there.

"Uh, this is Tualha, and we just met recently. Who are you?"

"Susan, didn't I say? Come on, let's get out of here and find someplace a little more cheerful to talk. This place is getting on my nerves. Unless you want to go down and see what that church-" With the crash, the tower that supported the bell collapsed, the fire finally weakening the structure enough to bring it down to earth again. "Or not. Guess that's not why we're here after all. Pity."

"But who are you? How did you get here?"

"How did you get here, Miss appears from thin air? I was sent here to help out, and told to wait for someone. And here you are, so it must be you I'm here to help. Stands to reason, right?"

“I must say I need it. Sorry, I’m a little out of sorts. I didn’t expect to actually find anyone here.”

“Why did you come, then?”

“I came by accident. I’m not even sure how, but I think I can guess. Come on, let’s get back.”

“Back? I’m not sure I follow.”

“Back to the real world, not this weird reflection of things. Where did you come from?”

Susan shook her head. “A long way away, but really no distance at all. I’ll explain what I can, later.”

“You better,” Nita muttered. “Okay, take my hand. Tualha, can you get back on your own?”

“Naturally,” the kitten answered.

Sparkle jumped up on Susan’s shoulders, and she looked around to make sure she hadn’t left anything lying about. She hadn’t, and found herself being pulled in an unexpected direction, finding herself in a much brighter, much more lived in area. The grass was greener, the air clearer. The church, which she could still see down the hill (which now had a road) was not on fire. There was a lake, and off in the distance, a town.

“Oh, this is much better,” she remarked. “But what spell did you use? I didn’t see you cast anything. Or did you just stop maintaining something, like Sparkle does with *Dimension Step*?”

“This is going to take a while.”

Susan looked at her watch again as Nita looked around, as if unsure she was back in the place she wanted to be.

“10:12, how about that? About an hour ahead of me, but is that right? 1993?”

“Yeah, it’s 1993. Why?”

“Huh. Time must run just a bit slower here. Ninety Three, your computers must suck! Do you even have an Internet?”

“A what?”

Susan gave a laugh. “You don’t! Wow, I can’t even begin to imagine what that’s like. No street view, so no bouncing around the globe for me. Anyway, where are we?”

“How specific do you want me to be? We’re in Ireland at the moment, does that help?”

“Ireland? Neat. Oh, how open is magic around here, I guess should be my first question. Like should I be hiding it or will doing spells not cause any fuss?”

“You better not, wizardry isn’t that widespread. How could you be where you were and not even know that? Are you a wizard or not?”

“Gotcha. It’s home all over again, ah well. So, you must know the area, is there a place we can sit and talk? I’ll answer all your questions then. And I think your kitten is wandering away.”

“I’m not hers!” protested Tualha. “I’m my own cat, and a bard thank you very much! Not to worry, I’ll be around when you need me.”

“Bard? How does he hold the lute?” She mimed playing one.

Susan shook her head a little. “I don’t know the area very well, I’m visiting relatives here, or more accurately the Powers That Be brought me here to help take care of whatever is causing me to go sideways like I did just. Wizardry to do that should be extremely complex, not just me looking around and suddenly I’m elsewhere.”

“True, the *Dimension Gate* spell is grade 10, not your everyday spell to use. To say nothing of the additions to go between worlds rather than just planes of the same world.”

“Grade what?”

“You don’t have a grading system? Odd, he said it was like... anyway, we’ll have to compare styles of magic and I can get up to speed on your problem here. Technically I’m here looking for a friend, so I’ll want to get that out of the way first. The fact that all worlds are under attack by the Darkness and I can help close them off is the icing on the cake, so to speak.” She shook her head. “There will always be more worlds than people that can traverse and save them, according to him. But that doesn’t mean we stop trying.”

“Slow down, the Darkness? Worlds under attack? And who is him? My head is still

spinning from seeing that weird version of Earth a second ago.”

“Oh, sorry about that. One time the problem came later, the next time I was dropped right in the middle of it. So I guess it can go either way.”

“What can? You aren’t making much sense.”

Susan sighed. “I should really start from the beginning. Is there a place we can go and talk?”

So Susan and Nita found a library, which took until about 11:00, and the two girls found a quiet place to sit. They had taken a bus (a real novelty for Susan) and now in a quiet corner, Susan got out *Question* and asked the local world if Luna was in the world.

“No.”

“That’s out of the way,” she remarked sadly. “Zero for one, but even my increased LUCK isn’t going to help with that, I fear. Oh, is that your book of wizardry?”

Nita had gotten a book of her own out of somewhere, making Susan wonder if she had a *Personal Dimension* of her own. She hadn’t seen any lights or symbology floating around, so she still didn’t exactly know how magic worked here.

“Want to trade?”

Susan shrugged and handed hers over, and got Nita’s in return. The outside looked like a beat up “So You Want to Be a Wizard” book from a library, not at all like hers with the new sensors in the front. She opened it and started to skim the pages.

“What is all this?” Nita asked, paging through hers. “It’s all these diagrams and stuff!”

“I was going to ask you the same question. Most of this is in some weird language, and the parts in... English oddly enough... are just theory about stuff.”

“That ‘weird language’ as you put it is the *Speech*. You can’t do magic without describing what you’re doing in the *Speech*.”

“I beg to differ. To do magic I envision the spell formula, which takes the form of those circular diagrams you see on the pages. I request the magic for the specific task I’m trying to accomplish, and speak the ‘incantation,’ usually just the name of the spell. Given how fast I have to cast it, there usually isn’t time for too many words.”

“This is all wrong,” Nita protested. “You don’t even have the Oath in the beginning. How can you be a wizard?”

“Who says I am? I’m a *Natural Magician*, and a Paragon. Wizards are people that wear cloaks, and wave wands about, at least in my experience.”

“Not here. Okay,” she said, handing the book back. Susan shoved it back into the *pocket*. “You said you could start at the beginning.”

“Gladly.” She gave what was probably to become her standard “hi I’m a dimensional traveler” speech, about why she was moving across worlds. She also told about how her magic worked, and showed her a quick *Light* spell, so Nita could see the spell symbology.

Nita duplicated the feat, making her own little ball of light in the air, and Susan grinned at it like meeting an old friend after far too long.

“You have no idea how nice it is to meet someone that doesn’t have to wave a wand around to do stuff. I bet your magic is just as useful as mine is, too. I feel at home here already.”

“Wish I did,” muttered Nita. “Okay, well, here’s the introduction to our type of magic. Which is odd to say, because I was under the impression it was the only type.”

“Yeah, tell that to Cloud and his friends. Go on.”

“Magic is speech. At the most basic, a spell is describing how you want the world to be, and it becomes that. Everything understands the *Speech* because the Powers That Be, those that made the world, used the *Speech* to speak everything into existence. We can use it to talk to animals, to cars, everything. Defining something changes it. So if we want our pencil to be sharper, we describe it as being sharper. That’s a spell. This,” she hefted her book, “is the wizard manual. Every wizard has something like it, though wizards of the ocean, like dolphins, get their knowledge directly from the sea.”

*You have dolphin wizards?* But Susan didn’t interrupt her.

“The information in it changes based on our needs at the moment. Like back home, in the US, that section is expanded and the Ireland section is tiny. Now that I’m here that’s

reversed. Plus it lists all the wizards nearby so if I need help I can go ask them. It can do maps, help me figure out spells, all kinds of things.”

“Nice. That’s more malleable than mine, and mine is only that way because my father did something to it, imparting it with a part of his soul. At least, so I was told. I wonder if he didn’t visit a world like this and figure out a little how your book worked. Then he worked that magic into his own, and then gave it to me. I guess I’ll ask him someday. The point is, The Darkness is here someplace, and he wants this realities’ energy. He’ll most likely work through someone to cover this world in darkness so he can take it. Let’s beat the crap out of him so I can move on and keep looking for Luna.”

“I wonder if it’ll be that simple,” said Nita, staring at her book but not really seeing it. “I’m basically alone here, without my partner Kit, and my support network, or anything. And I only just got here, and I really have no idea if my going sideways to find you was even a part of the problem! Or was it just because you were there and I needed to go get you? It’s all quite confusing.”

“Then I guess you better check the book,” said Susan, tapping it. “And find some of that help you said would be listed.”

“I guess you’re right. Give me a little while to read up on some of this new information it has for me, then we’ll go get some lunch, okay?”

“Sounds good to me! By the way, I’m being compelled to ask your middle name for some reason. This seems a good a time as any.”

“Compelled?”

“Yeah. In the notes about this world. It said to ask your middle name.”

“I hate my middle name!”

“Who doesn’t? So what it is. Come on, you can tell me!”

“Oh fine, but you better not go spreading it around.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

She hesitated as Susan made puppy eyes at her. “Okay, okay. It’s Louise.”

Susan and Sparkle both looked at each other, stunned.

“Is it... possible?” asked Susan.

“I suppose anything is,” replied Sparkle. “I mean that’s just too big a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“What?” asked Nita, looking between them. “What do you mean? Is that important or something?”

“Ah, you hate it anyway,” replied Susan. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Come on!”

“Nope! Ask me later, maybe if you’re really nice I’ll tell you before I leave.”

“Come ON!”

Settling in

Time: An hour and a half later

Place: Library

Susan walked around the library, noting with some interest that many books here were in English, but just as many were in Irish. They had an “old” computer which Susan snickered at, and an actual *card catalog*. She flipped through some books, but as far as she could see, the normal parts of her world and the normal parts of this world meshed up pretty well. No weird companies taking control of everything, no monsters roaming the lands, no xp-that-wasn't-xp. She really wanted to see what Nita's magic could do, apart from creating a small light, but she figured if they were going to be fighting the Darkness, there would be plenty of time for that later.

*I mean rewriting reality just by speaking what you want into existence? What stops them being all powerful? Energy requirements? But again, magic is secret here. What is it about wizards that compels them to keep quiet about what they can do? Tom had one thing right, and that was that magic was a survival trait. Those with magic should live longer and pass on magic to their kids. Unless they're all too busy doing magic to have kids?*

Nita was quiet on the way to find a place to eat, and when she spotted the place that served “American Style Fried Chicken” she muttered “challenge accepted, restaurant!” and went inside. Sparkle slipped in with them, dashing under a booth before anyone saw and protested her presence. Susan ordered something Irish she hoped she wouldn't regret and a soda, wondering if it would taste the same as at home. It did. Nita tried the chicken.

“I'll pay you back once we're not out and about,” said Susan. “I have a spell that can translate currency, and my *Resources Background* gives me \$1,000 a month to spend. Haven't spent any in a while, last place I was in the group I traveled with raked it in. Plus with traveling like this, who is to say when a month starts?”

“Convert... I guess you would have to, traveling like you do. But what's a background, and how does it give you money?”

“Oh, you want one?” Susan laughed. “Sorry, only people from my father's reality get those. And it gives me money by virtue of me paying background points for it. It just sort of happens. Though of course reality tries to get it to me in as mundane a way as possible.”

“I see.”

There was a moment of silence.

“So you've not been here long?”

“No, this is like my second full day here.”

“And you're already on assignment? Huh, guess we both don't mess around.”

“How do you figure?”

“Oh, I've always been a very ‘here's the problem, what's the solution’ sort of person.”

“Then here's one for you. If the problem is a bunch of kids staring at you because you're a foreigner, what's the solution?”

“Don't look like a foreigner in the first place. Of course the language thing-” Susan paid more attention to where Nita was looking. “There's someone right behind me, isn't there?” *Really should pay more attention to my Spirit Sense skill, an attack could come at any time after all.*

*Now that's the thinking of a real Wanderer, Susan, The Darkness praised her. We'll have you a paranoid mess before you know it!*

Thanks?

“Yes. Can we help you?”

Susan turned around to see an Irish boy and girl standing there, looking back with interest and sizing them up. She looked over, and it seemed they had broken off from a small gang of kids over at another table. While she hadn't noticed the pair's approach, she did notice it was boy-girl-boy-girl. *Crap, this is the 90's. It's bad enough, people knowing I like girls where I come from in ‘the future.’ Better keep a lid on it here. And what are they wearing? Oh man, 90's clothes!*

The kids were wearing a lot of black, and pretty much everything was tight. Tight pants,

tight skirts. *But at least they're pulled up. It'll be twenty years before kids decide having your pants halfway around your ankles is the new in thing. Heck, some of these kids might have kids by then! Babies, anyway.*

She snickered, but controlled herself. Actually, looking back at Nita she saw they were dressed similarly, in stout jeans and a t-shirt. *Maybe that's another reason I felt a kinship with this girl, she reminds me a little of home.*

"Something funny?" asked the girl.

"Just an unrelated thought. You got picked to be the welcoming committee, huh? Drew the short straw?" *Nice hair, didn't think pink was worn in the 90s back home, but then, how would I know? Maybe it was in Ireland.*

"Something like that," said the boy. "You are Yanks, aren't you?"

"You better field this one, Nita. I decline to answer on the grounds of making your heads explode." She snickered again.

"Ignore her," said Nita. "We're both American, yes."

"Cool. Vacationing or what?"

"Or what," said Susan as Nita said "Vacationing." They looked at each other.

"Vacationing," said Susan as Nita said "or what." They looked at each other again.

"Oh, you're a traveling comedy duo! I get it."

"I'm staying with relatives," clarified Nita. "I just met Susan here a little while ago. I'm not sure where she's staying at the moment."

"Probably a van down by the river," said Susan, feeling she was much too early for that reference. *I never did figure out how I can spout those little ditties. Huh.*

"How can you not know where you're staying? Did you just get in today?" asked the girl. "Are you backpacking across the country or something?"

"Look, you two want to sit down? Looming over me like that is giving me a crick in the neck."

"If you're going to be in the area awhile, come meet everyone," said the boy. Susan and Nita traded a look, but Nita shrugged and Susan said "okay."

They moved over to where the others were, Sparkle doing a quick spell of *Invisibility* so she could follow. The pair got introduced to Ronan and Majella, the boy and girl, respectively. Plus the others, and the pair introduced themselves. Ronan was tall, with dark hair that looked like it needed a good combing, and a strong nose. The others would probably never be seen again, so they didn't rate a description. Susan swept her gaze over all of them, silently noting their health level, and one weakness to cold, oddly. *Is there some kind of Susceptible weakness? I know there's Resistant Cold so I suppose there must be.*

Susan was struck by a sudden inspiration. *If I know someone's health, and assume their DTR is 1, I can figure out their CON. If I know their CON I know their GONE. If I can get better at Spirit Sense I might be able to estimate someone's energy total, and get a feel for their RES and END. With that I could figure out Wound penalty rates, lethal and non-lethal. I could actually know what minuses someone was under for being wounded! Neat.*

Nita did most of the talking, Susan wasn't really dealing with the things they were (homework, school) and also didn't want to let anything slip about the "future." But they seemed nice enough kids, and she got to learn a little more about Nita without having to ask the questions herself. Finally they had to be on their way, and the pair said goodbye.

"So, boyfriend back home?" Susan asked, one of the topics of conversation. It seemed Nita had come here at her parent's insistence, so that her and a boy named Kit could 'cool off' for a little while.

"He's my partner, like I think Sparkle is yours. I told them about the you know what, but I don't really think they get it. Even took them to the moon once, but maybe that was too big to get their heads around. Maybe we should have gone smaller."

"The moon!" Susan nearly shouted, but caught herself. "The moon? How do you go to the moon? Don't tell me you have a more advanced space industry here than we did in the 90s?"

Nita looked confused. "No, wizardry of course. Can't your magic get you to the moon?"

Susan shook her head. "What, you just *describe* yourself as being on the moon and Bob's your uncle? Crazy. And no, my teleport magic can only take me to where I've seen. I

suppose with a high enough powered telescope I could see details there well enough to make it. Couldn't use *Teleportal*, the vacuum would suck up the entire Earth's air if I let it. Would have to be *Teleport*. A bit of energy to cover the distance... but what about heat? And air? And radiation shielding? And air! I mean people can survive in a vacuum for a little while, as long as they're not trying to hold their breath so their lungs don't rupture. But I wouldn't want to stay too long and get distracted by, you know, not breathing, and then be unable to get the spell off to get home. Maybe I could do a timed *Spell Symbol* or..." she snapped her fingers. "What's that other one? *Spell Timer* or something, it activates automatically when something happens. Not breathing for twenty seconds could be it."

"You said air twice. It's all built into the spell. It works, believe me."

"Yes, I realize that, I thought it was such an important piece I would mention it again." Susan stared, a very bad feeling beginning to grow inside her. *Their magic can't actually be better than mine, can it? No, that's crazy talk.*

The two decided to walk back to where Nita was staying.

"They gave me a trailer out in back of the main house, you can probably hide there if you don't want my family to see you. Or the help, there's actually a lot of people through that house at any one time, I think. It's a farm so it's pretty busy."

"Thanks. I could just go hide out in my *Personal Dimension* if it's a problem though. I don't want to inconvenience you after all."

"I guess we'll just have to see how it goes. Wait, you have your own dimension?"

"Yeah, it grew out of my *Pocket Dimension*. I wanted something I could actually enter myself and live in if I needed to. Plus we needed the space to train. Good times. Good times."

"Our magic certainly is different."

"I guess. It's only afternoon, what our next move?"

"I'm not really sure what the exact problem is, that's the problem," said Nita. "I know what I did, but not the cause. I'm not even sure it's a problem with the area. I would look pretty stupid if I went up to a Senior and it turned out to be some weird thing going on with me."

"You mean like a new power you're developing? To cross into other worlds without doing spells? Okay, I can buy that. So you need to do more reading in that manual of yours, see if something like this had happened before, maybe?"

"Exactly. To someone or this place. Or other places for that matter. Then we can worry about how to fix it. The manual lists the Senior's address, but that he's only to be consulted 'in case of an emergency.' So it's something to do with me, or that I can do, specifically."

"No pressure." Susan thought about it. *Moving between worlds, no easy fix for that. Unless there's some object that's causing it that we can break, how would we even go about repairing such a thing. After all, my wrist unit... no, that's just signaling the Hub to open a doorway for me, isn't it? Could someone else have built a device like that? I never asked Silverstreak exactly how complex it was for tech to do what my magic does in that regard. Wait, moving between worlds?*

"Uh, if it isn't you, meaning it's the world itself, what keeps things in other worlds from moving into this one and causing trouble? You would not want the monsters from my last world to start pouring through to this one, believe me. Their HP alone... or would they gain health levels because now they're in our reality?" *But then, that's just an abstraction I have. Most people don't think in those terms because they aren't Paragons. So what would their capacity for damage be, anyway?*

Nita had stopped dead in the street, obviously not having considered this possibility. Susan looked back at her, and she took a couple of quick steps to catch up. "I'll try to read fast."

So Susan was introduced to Nita's aunt, Annie, and told her a mostly truthful version of why Susan was now there.

"Turns out she's just arrived her herself, and we just got to talking. We found we had a lot of things in common, and we've been hanging out all morning. She's nice."

"Welcome to Ireland," said Annie, "don't mind the ghosts."

“Oh, one of my best friends is a ghost. Name of Myrtle. She haunts a toilet.”  
Annie laughed. “None of that sort around here. You two enjoy yourselves, okay?”  
*Poor fools, they don't even believe me.*

And so Nita got to reading. Susan felt a little bad, making her do all the work while she just wandered around the farm (staying out of sight) and looking at the countryside. It was a pretty place, with a mountain in the distance that looked quite green from this distance.

“You could use the *Research* spell,” said Sparkle. “Maybe cut down on the reading she'll have to do.”

“Or we could just get things she's already read an hour ago. It's like her book is a permanent *Research* spell, from what I understand. She knows what to look for, I'm going to trust her to find it. Then we'll support her as best we can as she solves it, and be on our way.”

“Oh, that simple, huh? I guess if we're maintaining the ‘let the natives solve their own problems’ gig, that's fine.”

“That is exactly what we are doing. And we're looking for a place we can be undisturbed for a bit. I don't have any *Spell Papers* with *Alleviation* on them, and the note said her mother will develop cancer so I should leave her one. Odd, if she can go to the moon as casually as she suggests, that she can't cure that.”

“Like she said, your magics maybe just do things differently. I mean can you describe someone with cancer well enough to change them into the same person but without it? I wouldn't want to attempt it, even with a language meant for doing just that.”

“I guess. Still, I have *Regeneration* ones, because that's much shorter to make than the other. But I've got the time and the energy, so let's make a few.”

“I'm going to go look for that kitten, I think. He seemed to know what was going on.”

“Suit yourself. Don't get stepped by a horse!”

“Please.”

So Susan sat for three hours putting *Alleviation* down in *Spell Symbol* form, each one taking seventeen minutes so she didn't blow it. *Pity it's two spells, if I could do the Symbol for each, then put the spell into it, I could use my Mimic Materia for the job. But no, I have to maintain the Symbol, then put in the next spell, then start again. Ah well.*

She also got the bright idea of putting *Avatar of War* onto the sword itself, which took nicely. She put the *Symbol* on the blade, near the guard, and it appeared without issue. The trigger event was her getting it out, something most assuredly “overtly observable.” That way the next time she got it out, boom, she would be big, imposing, and attacking. She wouldn't have to waste an action getting the spell up, nor would she have to maintain it. *Win-win all around, if I say so myself. Love that spell. What am I saying? I love all my spells!*

Sparkle came back, saying she had found “the bard” but all she could get out of him was a bunch of poems and old stories that didn't make a lot of sense.

“Probably you don't have the background mythology of this place. The wizard mythology I mean.”

“Yeah. But that's not even the worst part.”

“What's the worst part?”

“First other talking cat I meet isn't even three months old!”

“There you are,” said Nita, coming around the corner. Susan had been hiding out behind a barn at the far edge of the field. “You okay?”

“Sure, just been working on some stuff. Find anything in that manual of yours?”

“I'm pretty sure the problem isn't with me. Apparently the Powers that made Ireland decided they liked their handiwork a little too much. They wanted to stay, but those higher up told them to leave so humans and bunnies and cats and things could move in. So they decided to go a bit sideways to a place that looked kind of liked it. That opened a sort of channel and now it's easier to do that sort of thing around here.”

“Oh, so that's normal? How about that.”

“No, it's not normal. Even that shouldn't allow the ease with which we moved between worlds. Something has happened around here.”

"In my terms the DIF might be one or two less, is what you're saying? I get it."

"I guess so. So what can we do about it?"

"More importantly, how does this fit with The Darkness? I suppose if it opens the floodgates here this world could be overrun in short order. That should probably be our goal for now, finding the local avatar."

"How can we do that?"

"It's never really tried to hide what it was, to a certain extent. In my world it took over the most evil person there and put its own plans into action. In the next it possessed some Ancient Dragon and just started tearing the place up. Turns out it had actually come to the reality I was last on thousands of years ago, their time. The people there were already trying to stop it, after digging it up and injecting it into people. Smart, huh? We just need to find a person like that, someone with odd behavior now, and enough power to do this."

"Haven't heard about anyone like that. And this person must be close, right? I mean it's happening here, not elsewhere."

"Exactly. Someone around here is not what they seem. Our job now is to find them!"

"And then what? We're talking about the being that made death! You can't just walk up and fight them."

"HA! We did the other times. And I'm not sure your death maker is the thing I'm talking about. Just because you have someone powerful in your reality, doesn't mean that being would stand a chance against something from another. Don't worry, an extra dimensional being could obviously crush us like bugs. It chooses not to because then it would lose the world's energy. So it has to obey the rules of the local world for the most part, because it can only fit a part of itself into our world. Of course it would know things we don't, and be able to use other types of power if the body is suited for it. But we can work around that, don't worry. I hope. Here, let me test it right now."

Susan got her pistol from her *Pocket Dimension* and activated it with the word "*Nullification*" and eight energy.

"Okay," she said, "try and do magic. Like that light spell, try that."

Nita did, and nothing happened.

"See? I've cut off all magic in a sphere around me. So I just do the same near the person we discover is causing this, I slice them up with my sword, problem solved. I couldn't do this with Sephiroth, that's who it was before, because his magic was more a *Spirit Energy* effect than what we do. Plus it wouldn't have mattered much, he was bizarrely strong. He didn't use much magic, in combat. But it seems to work fine here! As you guys don't have a genetically engineered SOLDIER program, I think we'll be okay."

"And what if the person it's taken over is innocent?"

"Is what? Oh." Susan considered. "Hasn't happened yet, but I suppose it could. Harder to control someone that doesn't want to be controlled, right? I guess I didn't consider that."

"You better. Even if someone is being controlled, I can't let you just murder them. It goes against everything wizards on this world stand for! Which is life, in case I wasn't clear."

"I know, I know. Fine, I will *threaten* the person I find and see what they have to say. If they try to escape or they can bypass my *Dead Magic* zone, choppy chop. If they want to be free, maybe my *Exorcise* spell will help. We can try various things once we find this person."

"That's at least somewhat more reasonable."

"I'll start looking tomorrow! I can ask the *Question* spell how far away the nearest otherworldly being is. That should help. If it can't tell me I'll come up with some others questions I can ask. For now though, I'm low on energy and hungry."

"Want to come up to the house and eat?"

Susan shook her head. "Just show me to the trailer. Eating with you would raise some uncomfortable questions. I'm hoping you can sneak me in, or Sparkle can put *Invisibility* on me. I've got energy for *Create Foodstuff* so I'll just eat whatever that gives me. Then go to sleep and get started early tomorrow."

"Create what?"

"*Create Foodstuff*. It's a low grade spell that creates a variety of simple foods. Bread, cheese, meat, fruits, that sort of thing. Unless I'm casting it for Sparkle, then it makes mostly fish and chicken."

“Yeah, chicken. Just keep telling yourself that,” said Sparkle. “It’s not rat or mouse or squirrel or bird or rabbit or anything like that.”

“I don’t want to know.”

“Wait, you can’t create food with magic! The universe doesn’t allow you to create food or money with magic!”

“Maybe *your* magic doesn’t, but mine can manage it just fine. Food, anyway. I can’t create overly precious metals with *Creation* but I bet I could manage a lump of pure iron that I could sell for money.”

Nita was shaking her head. “No, it’s impossible. You... you can’t.”

“I can. Believe me. I’ll show you. It disappears after twenty four hours, but as long as you eat it before then, it’s fine. I mean it’s just matter. Why would creating a sword, for example, out of nowhere be different than creating cake out of nowhere? It’s exactly the same thing. I mean I could create wood, and I can’t eat wood. But I could burn it, releasing the energy in the wood. Ergo energy can be created with magic and thus food can be created with magic. I mean if you ate plastic, would your magic stop you making a milk jug but you could make a loaf of bread? It’s insane.”

“How could you eat plastic?”

“I don’t know, maybe a spell could allow you to eat plastic. That would actually be interesting, a spell that will allow you to eat anything. And microbes eat plastic, the biodegradable kind, right? So that’s food for them. How far do you take it?”

“Come on, this I have to see.” Susan got pulled along by Nita in the direction of her little trailer.

“Don’t feel bad, the wizards in my world couldn’t create food out of nothing either, they could only change the properties of what they already had. Like refilling a glass or enlarging a cookie. Bizarre restriction, but there you are.” Susan shook her head. *She can stand on the moon but not make a snack for herself? And she can’t cure cancer? What exactly can her magic do?*

Trying to Prove It

Time: The next day

Place: Wandering the local area

Susan had spent the night on Nita's rather too-small couch but a bit of sleep fog had rendered her unconscious before she could grow too uncomfortable. After finishing off some of the food she had made with her magic the night before she was ready to start tracking down the host of Darkness in this world.

Nita, of course, still couldn't understand how such a thing was possible, and even showed her the sections in her book that detailed why. Susan was happy to show her the spell formula, even make her a copy so she could study it for herself.

"I do have to warn you, a very smart girl called Hermione from my world tried to convert my type of magic into hers. She didn't get very far, as I understand it."

But Nita took it, saying she would have some of her wizard friends back home look into it. With that, she and Susan took a bus into town and started walking about.

"And why are we just walking about?" asked Nita.

"You saw me use *Question* magic before we left. I asked 'Is there a being, apart from myself and Sparkle, that does not belong in this world and is somewhere nearby?' and I got a yes. Then I asked "Where should I go today to have the best chance of seeing the being that does not belong on this world?" and got "town" as the answer."

"That's all true, yes. But it's not much to go on."

"It was enough. Trust me, I have about four extra senses that you don't. One of them is going to reveal the culprit today. I just have to keep my eyes, and senses, open."

"Four? How can you have that many extra senses?"

"Easy, one's a spell I picked up in the last world. One came along from my having the *Spark of Magic*. One came from picking up *Spirit Mage* from the guy who brought me here. And one he told me about that I could learn because I had passed between dimensions. See, all explainable."

"Yeah, she just had to sacrifice her sense of moderation, irony, and propriety," said Sparkle.

"Uh, excuse me? I never had any sense of moderation."

"I stand corrected."

"But there is one thing I had to give up, and it was hard one."

"What's that?" asked Nita.

"Let's just say I'll never be able to do stand up comedy again."

"Why is-"

"Timing," Susan said over her.

Nita groaned.

"I don't know, you were doing pretty well yesterday at lunch with the whole 'vacation' thing," reminded Sparkle.

"Yeah, maybe we could get an act together. Comedy magicians!"

"No," both said.

"Aw!"

They poked around town all morning, but Susan hadn't come up with anything out of the ordinary.

"Want to get lunch at that same place again?" suggested Nita.

"What? You fly thousands of miles to visit another country, and already you're falling into a pattern? Come on, there must be twenty places to eat around here, why not sample them all? One per day, and then write a... oh, you don't have blogs yet do you?"

"I what? Anyway, the last place was fine, wasn't it?"

"Oh, I see."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's that *boy* you met there yesterday. That's who you want to see, you don't care about the food, do you?"

"His name was Ronan! And... no comment."

"Well, someone remembered his name, and I don't need to learn a wizard language to know what 'no comment' means."

"So what? You didn't think he was cute?"

"Ah, no. I don't find many boys cute. Sorry."

"Oh." Nita didn't press the issue. They continued walking in silence for a moment. "So where are we going?" she asked at last.

"We're following that truck!" Susan shouted as a pickup truck with a metal cube in the back roared by them. "*Speed Plus*, come on Sparkle!"

"*Acceleration!*" cast Sparkle on them both, magic swirling. No one paid much attention but Susan and her cat had no problem trailing the truck until it got to where it was going. Luckily, it didn't have far to go, and Susan peeked out from behind a building as she watched the lady in the truck get out. She was older than Susan by about 45-50 years and her hair was white. She wore glasses, wasn't very tall, and wore stout boots.

Susan caught her breath, studying the truck now that the woman driving had gone into the hardware store that she had parked in front of.

*Separate. There are two separate energy sources.* She could feel them, now that the box and the woman were not near each other anymore. *The box actually has a Spirit Energy signature, and that woman had far more energy than a normal person, that's for sure. The question is, what do we do about it? Is that box the source of our troubles?*

Nita ran up, panting. "Why did you take off like that? And how did you run so fast?"

"Magic. Don't you have magic to accelerate yourself?"

"Oh, yeah. I didn't even think about it."

Susan groaned. *Oh great, another magic user that doesn't reach for magic first.*

"Anyway, forget that. What did you see?"

"See? I felt it. That box has a *Spirit Energy*. And the lady that came out of that truck? She has a really weird energy herself, and way more than the average person around here."

Nita looked over at the truck, then where it was sitting. "I've seen that truck. That's the lady who was putting on horseshoes yesterday. The box in back is actually a small forge."

"She's a weird one then. What normal woman puts on horseshoes? No wonder she wears those heavy boots, probably to hide the horseshoes. Wait, did the actually have horse legs?"

"She was putting them on horses at the farm, you boob!" Nita laughed and punched Susan in the arm.

"Oh! You know her, then? You've been here, what, this is your third day? And you met a person that set my *Spirit Sense* off just by driving by?"

"There are no accidents."

"All the people that injure themselves in the kitchen would beg to differ. Come on, I want to get a better look at her."

So the three walked into the hardware store, where Bidy was buying nails, and who spotted them right away.

"Hello!" she said cheerfully, "I'm sorry, I forgot your name!"

"I'm Nita, and this is Susan."

"I think you two have a cat following you. What an interesting thing!" The two turned, and Sparkle had been trying to hide but apparently Bidy saw her anyway. "You here to buy a hammer? I'm here for nails myself! And I don't mean a manicure." She held up a plastic bag with nails in it, laughing as though she just told a wonderful joke.

Susan laughed too. "No, we saw your truck and I wanted to introduce you to Susan. She's sort of visiting Ireland herself, but she hadn't seen anything like your forge."

"Indeed," said Susan dryly. "It seems almost alive."

Bidy looked at her curiously. "You don't know how many people say that to me. Just a standard portable forge though. Must be the care and attention I give it, giving it a life of its own."

*That, or all the people she's fed into it, thought The Darkness. Way I see it, best way to take her down would be to get the gun out, negate magic in the area, and put a couple of shots in her. You'll be long gone before the cops get here. Or you could have Sparkle put up an Illusion around the place, cover what you're doing until you walk out.*

The trouble was, Darkness was right. She could wait until the woman turned to pay for her 'not manicured nails' and get the gun out. One action to negate magic in the area so even if this person was a wizard, they couldn't do anything. Another to pull the trigger. She had the skill, she couldn't miss at this range. Drop the *Dead Magic*, open a *Teleportal* and head back to the farm. Almost she started the magic to do it. *Almost.*

*Wait, you're advocating for shooting part of yourself in the back?*

*Hey, you found me, fair and square. It's only a matter of time now, and honestly, you're going to win on worlds you visit, I see that now. Better to cut my losses, take what energy I have gained, and put this little sliver of my consciousness someplace you're not.*

*Right, you know where I am now, so can you be assured I'm not elsewhere, causing you more trouble.*

*Exactly. And really, this was the best I could come up with on this world. There are absolutely no huge dragons, feared wizards, nothing, on this world. I thought I could blend in and finally make some headway here but no, you had to show up. I mean why did you pick this world first anyway?*

*It was first on the list.*

*She's turning. Do it!*

Susan was tempted. But she remembered the last time she had believed her "sure victory" using this method. It hadn't worked out then, why would it work out now?

*This part of me won't have Free Magic going, there's no reason for it. What am I going to do?*

*No, you must recognize me. If you did, then you set something up to defend against that very strategy, because I've used it before. I mean you beat me the first time I used it, and you couldn't have seen it coming. No, you have something special in mind if I do that again.*

*You're so paranoid. But not really, most travelers like you get even worse, just like you will. Too bad, this would have been the perfect opportunity.*

*Don't worry, another will come.*

So Susan exclaimed over the forge, which Bidy was all too happy to show her, and she wished them a good afternoon and drove away.

"Well? Still think she's the avatar of evil?" asked Nita.

"She's something. I couldn't see her health level, that's a sure tip off."

"Her what?"

"She's a boss type character?" asked Sparkle. "That explains the odd *Magic* and *Spirit Sense*, doesn't it?"

"A what?"

"I can see how healthy or damaged people are," explained Susan. "People. But I couldn't tell anything about her. That means she's something else."

"Then how come you felt that energy you said you felt?"

"Ha! Know what would happen if you boiled water and didn't let any steam escape?"

"Your pot would blow up."

"Exactly. I'm getting a sense of the energy that just naturally flows away from her. Nothing alive can help that, I think. Not if they don't like blowing themselves up, anyway. You know where she lives? I want answers, and I'm not going to get them in the middle of a hardware store."

Nita shook her head. "Like I said, I met her at my aunt's farm. Maybe we could look in the phone book though."

"Oh, right, those aren't useless at the moment because everyone uses a cell phone."

"A what?"

"You'll see."

"Fine. But can we get lunch now?"

“Sure! We can even go see if your new *crush* is around.”

“Shut up!”

“Make me!”

But both were laughing.

So they asked the kids (hey how about that, they did come into play again) and one of them knew where she lived.

*Thank you, LUCK of nine, for that sixteen LUCK check roll!*

This time Nita was more adventurous, ordering something Ronan suggested, and Susan ordered the same. They stayed and talked for about an hour, but Susan was antsy to get a look at “Bidly’s” house before she went back there. So the two said their goodbyes and headed off.

They made their way to a house with a large barn in back, which Susan said was perfect. She used *Unlock* to open the door, and shoved it aside.

“She’s going to know we’re here!” protested Nita.

“I know, that’s the plan. We’re going to be *invisible*. When she comes in here to see why the door is open, you slam it shut. She’ll whirl around and I’ll cut off magic in this area. Then we’ll get some answers.”

“I don’t know, I just have a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. There is no way that person is human. Not when so many things I sensed about her were so off. We do an afternoon’s waiting, confront her, and you get to enjoy the rest of your time here without going sideways.”

“I hope you’re right. There could be one other inhuman thing, and attacking it would be... bad form, at the very least.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll know if she attacks us, right? I won’t attack if she doesn’t!”

The area inside was an actual forge, and all three looked around without touching anything.

“I don’t feel anything magical around here,” cautioned Susan, “but that doesn’t mean there aren’t mechanical traps of some kind. Be careful.”

“Odd that the supposed avatar of evil you’re chasing would live in such a normal place.”

“I guess. But maybe after being chased off three worlds it’s becoming a little more subtle.”

“I hope not,” said Sparkle. “We don’t do subtle.”

Susan laughed. “That we do not!”

So the three waited. They discussed strategy, and what Nita’s magic could do, as she didn’t really have any weapons. Susan offered her a sword, but Nita said she’d probably just cut her own foot off, and would stick to magic. She reviewed some spells in her book as they waited, an activity Susan approved of. As night fell, Susan started to get worried someone at the farm would miss her, but suddenly a car drove up the driveway towards the house.

“Showtime,” said Susan, nodding to Sparkle. They got *Invisibility* put on them, and Nita got in position behind the door. Susan had her gun out, ready to activate.

“Hello?” called Bidly, walking into the room. She was looking around, and once past the midway point towards the forge, Nita slammed the door. She became visible again, and Bidly whirled. *Much faster than a woman her apparent age should be able to.* “Nita?”

“*Nullification!*” Susan intoned, making her own *Invisibility* drop, and bringing up the gun. Bidly whirled around again but froze as she looked at the gun.

“Darkness, how nice to see you again,” said Susan sarcastically. “Saw your handiwork when I first arrived. I have to say, usually you’re more... what’s the word... blatant, than that. But I suppose dozens of world’s worth of creatures coming through holes in the air and possibly tearing apart everything in sight, including each other, would be quite a spectacle, wouldn’t it?”

“What are you talking about? How did you get a gun? Am I being robbed? But you could have taken anything and just left-”

“Oh, bravo. I’d clap, but,” she gestured to the gun with her free hand. “The other two times you couldn’t wait to show off that you knew me. Taking a different tack this time? That’s fine.”

“I think you have the wrong person-”

“Save it! I felt your energy, and I can’t see your health level. Plus your magic is all screwed up, if what I compare to Nita is any indication. And even as you stand there my *Dimension Sense* (which Susan rolled max on, a thirteen) is telling me you’re not supposed to be here. So cut the crap, you’re The Darkness, and all I need to know is, should I shoot you before or after you leave that poor woman’s body? I’d like after, but whatever.”

“I’m not who you think. Nita, tell her, I’m... one of the Powers That Be!”

“Oh no!” said Nita, hands flying over her mouth. “We got it wrong, Susan. It’s okay, she’s one of the good guys! I was afraid of... Susan?”

The gun hadn’t wavered.

“Have any proof?” Susan asked. “Because that’s a convenient little story, I’ll admit. Fits the facts. Maybe a little too well, because my story fits the facts too. Don’t suppose there’s any way to prove it?”

“I’m... trying. What did you do?”

Susan barked a laugh. “Locked down magic in this room, as if you didn’t know. I wasn’t going to give you the chance to use my father’s power against me again, that’s for sure. So this time we decide this without magic. And I can’t believe I just said that.”

“Look, maybe I can bring someone back... my advisers,” pleaded Nita. “I’ll go and get them, and they’ll tell you! I mean you’ll believe me if I say they’re okay, right?”

“Them? There’s two of them?” Nita nodded. “Okay, I doubt that all three could be avatars at once, though I suppose there’s no reason they couldn’t. But even Darkness can’t cover that many angles at one time, right?” She shook her head. “Whatever. Just go and get back here. I’ll cover whatever this is.”

“If you really are... who you say, I’m really sorry about all this.”

“Wait, you can’t go! The-”

Susan took a half step towards her. “Don’t think of moving from that spot. Go, she might have another trick up her sleeve that isn’t magical. I can feel any buildup of *Spirit Energy*, if you’re going to try something with that. I’ll pull this trigger if I do. GO!”

Nita threw the door open again, speaking in that weird language of hers. Oddly enough, Susan’s *Adaptive Skill* kicked in, as if making a *Language* check to understand a foreign language. As she got 10% per point on the check, and she got an eleven, she understood 110% (rounded down to 100%) and realized she was asking the universe to please take her to such and such a place. Once outside the field (Susan had marked it out earlier, where it would reach to) she spoke a final word but instead of disappearing, she was knocked off her feet and spent sprawling with a cry of anguish.

*Did she just backfire?*

“I warned you!” said Bidy, taking a step. “We have to-”

“What did you do?” yelled Susan, squeezing the trigger three times and aiming center of mass. She spent energy on MANipulation, getting a 23 on her check, so even with a LUCK of ten, there was no way Bidy could get out of the way. She tried, spending 8 energy on REFlexes to try and dodge the bullets, and also trying something again with magic, which of course failed. The three bullets slammed into her chest, throwing her backwards.

“Crap! Nita!” She dismissed the *Dead Magic* field and ran over to her, unstrapping the knife from her leg after transferring the gun to the other hand. “Hang on, I’ll save you!” She raised the blade high, about to stab it into the unmoving form of her new friend, when she was blown off her feet and had to make a *Gymnastics* check to roll out of it. She again spent energy, getting an eighteen and rolling to her feet as a reactive action.

“I don’t know what you are,” said Bidy, somehow holding her knife, “but you can be sure I won’t let you try to murder her too.”

“Lady,” said Susan, fury in her eyes, “maybe you’re Darkness and maybe you’re not. Either way, you just stopped me saving a friend. That was a big mistake.” She held out her

hand, dropping the gun from the other as it seemed not to have done much good. There she was, not bleeding to death from bullet wounds at all. *Maybe a bit of magical fire and good old crystalline sword will do the trick.*

*“Blade.”*

Round 1- FIGHT!

Time: Just then

Place: Outside Bidy's barn

Susan had but one thought as the sword materialized from out of her hand and she grabbed it before it could fall.

*Aerith, you didn't remind me to save before I started all this! Isn't that your job?*

Suddenly she was looking down on Bidy, who hadn't been that tall to begin with, and was somewhat surprised to see that she looked surprised.

*Is Darkness really just getting into the character or am I making a horrible mistake?*

Bidy put out a hand and a hammer came crashing through the wall, which she caught with a practiced ease.

*Like I'm going to get within striking distance. I hate to only do one third damage, and really do need to get Long Range up and running when I can. Oh well.*

Sparkle tried to cast *Acceleration* instantly, but rolled two from minimum so it didn't go off. She considered spending the two XP but it wasn't like Susan could really be hurt in that armor of hers, so she figured she would just wait. There was only one opponent, after all.

*How embarrassing, have I ever failed a spell?* she thought.

Susan and Bidy went at the same time, so Bidy started towards her. Susan dropped back into the stance she always saw Cloud using when he had borrowed her *Slash All Materia* and swung, making a called shot to Bidy's body. Bidy threw herself to the side as the blade seem to materialize from out of nowhere. It passed harmlessly through the space she had been occupying and stopped her forward momentum.

*Stupid defense checks, Cloud never had to worry about the monsters he was facing making a dodge when this was coming at them. They just took it. Isn't only doing a third the damage enough? Why do they get to see it coming as well?*

"You are dangerous," said Bidy. "I've never seen any wizardry like you're using. Well then, try this!" She chucked the hammer, which sped towards Susan like a shot. Susan did a casting of *Deflection* figuring that would be better than her dodge, which was at this point not yet *Accelerated*. She rolled max, an eighteen, and smugly believed that would stop just about anything.

Naturally the hammer smashed straight through, and impacted her armor. Being a thrown weapon, she depended on her *Passive Dodge* which was now an fourteen, for the calculation to see if it smashed through that as well. Her armor AR was currently ten, and ties go to the defender. Even as the hammer bounced away from her she failed her STRength check and flew backwards, teeth rattling from the force of the blow. Bidy put her hand out and the hammer came back.

*Okay, who does this lady think she is, Thor? Also, better start using more energy because it seems she doesn't have average stats, or is spending lots of energy herself...*

Sparkle began casting *Destruction* on the hammer, and magic glittered around it.

"You aren't doing that," remarked Bidy, looking over at her. Susan was waiting for a chance to do a reactive action and make her *Gymnastics* check to stand up. "But who else has wizardry like-" She glanced around and saw Sparkle. "A cat? I don't want to hurt you, cat, but if you don't stop..."

She raised the hammer, then seemed to hesitate as if waiting to see what Sparkle would do.

Susan made her check to get up, managing it with a fourteen and rolling to her feet, sword out. She saw the magic take hold of the handle of the hammer, which disappeared in a puff of smoke. The head bounced down past her, and she stupidly looked down at it.

"Okay, this is all wrong," she remarked, "but if that's how you want it." She transferred the knife to her other hand with a flip and chucked it at Sparkle, who didn't bother dodging. It sliced into her, doing healing "damage" if that can even be a thing.

*Wait a second, can I do a called shot to the back of someone? This Materia allows me to attack from a distance, and it doesn't respect physical space...* Rather than think about it, Susan swung again, and Bidy caught the motion out of the corner of her eye. Sadly she only

got a ten on her check, so even with the penalty for being “flanked” Bidy just moved her head a little and the blade whistled by.

“You’re next!” she promised, looking around for something else to use as a weapon.

“Take another look,” said Susan.

“What?”

“Thanks for the knife back,” said Sparkle, putting it into her own sub-space pocket. As it was currently shoved inside her, it counted as her touching it, and vanished. “Susan put a lot of work into it, she wouldn’t want to lose it.”

“Okay, what?”

Susan couldn’t help laughing.

“Are you mocking me?”

“Nothing of the sort,” said Susan, “It’s just that look on your face that *Dazzle!*”

The magic hit but Bidy shook it off. “Don’t you mean Glitterdust?” she asked scornfully. “Your spells don’t seem to be working very well on me.”

*True, what are this person’s stats? I’ve been holding back a little in case I’m wrong but she did just try and kill Sparkle. So I guess no more Mrs. Nice Girl.*

“I didn’t want to use this,” she continued somewhat sadly, “but I guess I better stop playing around.”

*Oh great, she wasn’t being totally serious either? Susan watched as Bidy pulled a sword from somewhere, and dropped back into a crouch. And she has her own pocket dimension as well. This just gets better and better.*

“You and me both lady,” she replied.

“*Entangle!*” cast Sparkle, getting a seventeen. The nearby plants grew and twisted, reaching out to grab Bidy and hold her fast. She struggled, but was unable to break free.

“Nice one!” said Susan, beginning to cast again. She took the full time, figuring Bidy wasn’t going anywhere.

Bidy was helpless as Susan finished the five segments of *Elemental Burst: Knockout* and dazzling energy erupted around her body. With nowhere to go, the energy tore into her and she passed out, the sword falling from her hands and she went limp. The plants around her were still holding her up, but Susan didn’t think it was a trick.

“Quick, the knife,” she shouted, running over to Nita. Sparkle was at her side a second later, and the knife clattered out, which Susan picked up and jabbed into her, making her gasp.

There was an explosion of wind nearby, and Susan’s head jerked in that direction.

“Get away from her!” shouted a boy about Nita age. He looked hispanic, with a darkish complexion, black hair, and brown eyes. He was accompanied by two older men, both in their mid thirties, one with as fine a mustache as any man could ask for. Both had dark hair, and average looks, but both wore expressions of anger when they saw the blade sticking into Nita.

“Funny story-” Susan started to explain, hoping to defuse the tension with some humor. After all, hadn’t this very thing happened back with Lockhart in the hospital? It had. And she was sure they would laugh about it sometime, maybe ten years or so from now.

“I said get away from her!” shouted the boy again. *Pretty brave, he just teleported in to find a huge girl in armor, apparently stabbing his friend. And he didn’t back down.*

“This just keeps getting better,” remarked Sparkle. “*Entangle!*” Susan noticed she dropped the initial one as she cast, any plants not real crumbling to dust, as the others relaxed their grip and Bidy fell over.

“Hey!” shouted the one older wizard, as plants again grabbed for everything in the area, holding it fast, or at least trying to. Susan saw that two of the three people in the area probably weren’t going to be held.

*Fine. “Hypnotic Field!”* she cast, spending maximum energy on the spell. (This was now a thirteen for her) She got a twenty one, and those inside got eighteen or less.

“Now look,” she said, finally grabbing the knife back out of Nita, who was stirring at last. She walked through the field towards them, but the plants were still in the way. “As you can see, you’re helpless. Sparkle?” She waved a hand into the mass of plants.

“Right.” They went away again.

"Thank you. I could easily chop you to bits while you're like this. But if you can let me explain, I'll let you go. Look, I'll even disarm myself, so you know I'm on the level." She decided she wasn't in danger anymore, ending the scene and making her armor go away. That done, she put the sword back inside her, stabbed her hand with the healing knife, and put that back in the holster tied to her leg. "See, no more weapons."

Nita groaned. "Oh, my head. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. But if you can tell the cavalry not to attack me, I'll let them go."

"Yeah, sure," she said, getting shakily to her feet. "What's that?"

"This? Just a bit of magic for keeping people from attacking me. I didn't want the situation to get any more out of hand than it already had."

"It's pretty." Nita walked towards it.

"No, wait, stay out of the-" She went into the circle of light and zoned out. "Oh, come on!" Susan went over to her and closed her eyes, breaking her out of it. "Back out, another step, okay you can open your eyes again."

"How come you can go in there?" she demanded.

"I cast the spell, of course! Now tell them!"

Nita shouted to the others. "It's okay, she's with me. This is the girl I was telling you about."

"Right," Susan said, glad that was taken care of. "I'm going to drop the spell. Someone needs to check on that woman there. She claims to be some "power that be" or whatever but I say she's a soul sucking monster I call The Darkness. If I could get someone's opinion on that before she wakes up, that would be great."

That said, she dropped the spell, and the others came back "awake" again.

"Nita," said the boy, edging away from Susan. "Are you okay?"

"I feel great, actually. Not sure what happened. I was trying to come get you, and then suddenly you were already here."

"I thought it was something she did," said Susan, walking back over to her gun. She picked it up and shoved it into her sub-space pocket rather than take the time to open her *Pocket Dimension* at the moment. "You ran out, cast, and suddenly were thrown off your feet."

"It's the area," said one of the older wizards. "Didn't your manual warn you? There's a lot of overlay in Ireland. Doing any wizardry without compensating for it can be very dangerous."

"Is that so? No wonder she was sticking to physical attacks."

"Look, who are you?" asked the other older wizard. "And did you just fight with one of the Powers that Be and *win*?"

"Long story... Short version? Me Susan. Me travel worlds, kick evil butt. Me find woman me think is evil. Me kick butt. End of story. Good story."

"Can... can I get a slightly longer version of that story?"

"Sure, once that creature is secure to my satisfaction."

"I think she really is a Power," said Nita.

"A good Power, or a bad one? Because until I get some evidence one way or the other, there's no way I'm trusting that woman."

"But how do you know?" Susan protested, moments later. The woman had been tied up, using some chain the group had found in the barn. The two older wizards were now trying to convince her this was all just some misunderstanding and she was one of the good ones.

"We can just feel it," Tom said, (and yes, the irony was not lost on Susan at all.)

"They would know better about their own reality," said Sparkle hesitantly. "Right?"

"I guess we'll just have to trust them. Fine, I'll wake up 'Biddy' here and see what she has to say for herself." She got out the knife, which the others jumped up at. "It's fine, it's my healing knife, don't worry about it. You saw it sticking out of Nita when you arrived, remember?"

"Who puts a healing spell into a knife?" asked Carl.

*Maybe I should change it, if that's possible. It's just that the way I made it, the activation is sticking into someone. I would have to rework it to allow it to be cast or used like my other Materia now. Oh well, I can worry about that later.*

"It was necessary at the time," she explained, sinking the blade into Bidy's chest. Her eyes fluttered and she woke up, as all she had was non-lethal damage, which instantly went away with *Alleviation*.

"What's going on?" she asked, struggling against the chains.

"Just a precaution," answered Susan. "Now, if you can offer some proof as to your identity, we can clear this whole thing right up."

"You want me to prove I'm not the Lone Power?"

"Or The Darkness, yes. That would be ideal!"

"How do you expect me to do that? I can't just whip out my Bright Power Membership Card you know."

"I don't know, think of something. These people want to vouch for you, and if that's the best I'm going to get... fine. I'll accept their word for the moment. You can convince me with your actions later."

"If you don't mind me asking, who are you really?" asked Kit.

Bidy sighed. "I guess it's all out in the open now, huh? I would really like to know how you found me out, and what that power was you were using. I've had many names over the years, the Smith of Falias, and Govan, Smith of the Gods."

"This workshop... it fits," said Nita. "The Lone Power wouldn't strive to build, or create. That One only wants to tear down. Can we let her out please?"

Susan looked around at the others, who all nodded. "Very well, but if this comes back to bite us later, I reserve the right to hold it over your heads for at least twenty minutes.

*Unlock.*" The lock that held the chain in place clicked open, and Bidy shrugged the chains off.

"Yes, that! What was that? You're no wizard, that's for sure."

"No, I'm a *Natural Magician*." Susan went on to explain her method of using magic.

"And it really is magic," said Bidy when her story was done. "It's not wizardry, that's for sure."

"I suppose there is a difference. Whatever you call it, my power is effective enough. Now, what can you tell me about what's going on around here?"

"What do you mean, going on around here?"

"You haven't noticed?" asked Nita. "I guess maybe I did just stumble into something, and there's really no trouble here at all."

"I'm here for a reason," Susan reminded her. "If she isn't the reason, we have to keep looking. The Darkness should be around here someplace, and I want to move on to the next world I have to check."

"We need to get back," said Tom, "if things are handled here?"

Susan glared at Bidy, but nodded. "I beat her once, I could do it again."

"Thanks for coming to the rescue," Nita said to Kit. "How did you know I was in trouble, anyway?"

"Are you kidding?" Kit laughed. "I felt it from where I was. How could I miss it?"

"Oh."

"It was nice meeting you, Elder Sister," said Carl. "I'm sorry it wasn't under better circumstances."

"The world turns us all," she said with a sad smile.

The two figured out how to teleport back home without blowing themselves up, and Nita, Susan, Sparkle, and Bidy were left looking at each other.

"So," Bidy said, probably wondering how to proceed. "You're from another world, huh?"

"Which I don't get," protested Nita, "now that you mention it. I've been to other worlds. Wizardry was the same there as here."

"The way it was explained to me, it's like a tree. You live on one branch of the tree. Even if you go to another world, it's still just the same main branch. When you went sideways to that other place, you were traveling to a different leaf on a divergent branch. I go between branches."

"And that's where you're afraid this Darkness of yours is from?"

Susan shook her head. “No, he’s from further *up* the tree, and he wants to climb higher still. But to do that he needs energy. Energy he’s going to get by sucking it out of the branches were we all live.”

“You thought that’s who you were fighting?” asked Biddy. “Just how much were you holding back, anyway?”

Susan looked at her out of the corner of her eyes. “Do you really want to know? Suffice to say, it could have been a lot messier if I had been more confident. Besides, just like you, the universe The Darkness finds itself in limits the available power it can use. It could energy blast me, but I would get my normal checks against it. Of course in some worlds it can bring more of itself, so it might have more abilities than it otherwise could. I don’t really know how it all works myself, I just do what I can with the magic I have. Bottom line, I knew I wasn’t fighting the real thing, just an avatar, which I’ve managed to beat before.”

“I see. Well, if I can help, let me know. It sounds a lot worse than my brother, He just wanted recognition for His work, that none of us in the beginning had considered. He’s proud, so He couldn’t back down afterwards and admit maybe entropy wasn’t such a great idea. At least this universe will get billions of years to run and grow before it dies. This Darkness creature, it seems it would just suck the universe dry in a matter of days.”

“It would seem that way, as it would operate outside the branch. And thus, outside your time flow.”

“Why can’t it just do it then?” asked Nita.

“You mean like a vampire? Just hold someone down and start sucking away? Do you have those?”

“Not real ones, that I know of. Thank goodness!”

“Okay, but you get the idea. As I understand it, because you’re all using the power now, yourselves. It’s bound up inside life everywhere. There’s only so much to go around, and it’s in use. It has to kill you all off before that power will be free and he can take it for himself. Plus, it tried to multitask and take them all at once. That spilt it’s attention, and power, so it kind of has to do things the hard way.”

Biddy snorted. “So basically, we’re the termites living inside the bark of the tree, and we’re fighting off a lumberjack that wants to cut the branch off.”

Susan seemed impressed with the analogy. “Exactly. We keep fouling up the blade on the chainsaw.”

“And once you kick him out, another being like him puts a fence around the branch so it can’t ever try again?”

“That’s what he told me. I have no reason to doubt him.”

“So... no hard feelings?” She held out a hand.

Susan took it. “If you really are who you say, I do apologize. You do understand, I was sent here for a reason and you looked a lot like the reason. I didn’t consider other beings here might sort of fit the parameters I was searching for.”

“Don’t worry, I know all about need.”

“You and me both,” muttered Nita, causing them all to laugh.

What Hunts

Time: Early Afternoon

Place: The hills of Ireland

"It's there someplace," one of the Silverstreak agents said to Susan when she called in that morning to make sure. "I'm really sorry we can't be more specific than that."

"No, I get it, that's why we get sent. If you could pick The Darkness out from where you were, you could just laser him from there. **Pechu!**"

The agent laughed. "We might use something a little more effective than that, but yes, I recognize the sentiment. Sorry to make you do this, I know you just want to find your friend and your father."

"I can't walk away from an entire reality that could be in danger. And Luna can take care of herself, I wouldn't have considered bringing her if she couldn't. If you guys say part of The Darkness is here, I'll take your word for it. I just sort of screwed up and accused the wrong person, so I hoped there might be at least some clue to where it was hiding."

"The best intel we have generates the gates for you to go through. The rest is up to you."

"Okay, thanks." *For nothing.*

"Later."

"Bye."

Susan watched the tiny face of the agent disappear, then sighed.

"No luck huh?" asked Sparkle.

"Not a bit. And no one else we've sensed seems to fit the profile."

"Our rating in the skill is pretty low though."

"True. But it isn't like *Spirit Sense*, where you have *Ley Lines* and people's own energy and plants and everything else around to muddy the waters. The Darkness should stick out."

"It's only been a couple of days."

"I guess. The Ancient Dragon showed up way later, I was with Louise for some time. I really hope I'm not going to have to wait every time. Of course The Darkness must guess I'm looking for my dad, so naturally it would want to delay me as much as possible."

"That reminds me. Tom is a common enough name, but Louise? And it's Nita middle name... do you think it means anything?"

Susan shrugged. "These worlds are removed in time, space, and dimension. Take this world for example- it seems close to ours. If I figured out where Nita lived in this world and took a trip there in mine, would I find her? Would she be a witch or not have magic? The smallest thing could make a person's life change drastically."

"And talent for this wizardry wouldn't necessarily translate to wanded wizardry back home."

She chuckled. "It's the cutie mark crusaders all over again- what do you do if your special talent is rocket design or some AI programming if the underlying technology isn't there?"

"You get a person like Leonardo, who put a lot of things down on paper but was hundreds of years ahead of a time his true genius could have actually have been most useful."

"That's for sure. But to answer your original question, I think it's just a coincidence at this point, but if more start to crop up I reserve the right to change my opinion. I mean we are all from the same trunk, right? So it's not unreasonable to assume some minor elements might be seen in more than one place. She's not a zero, that's for sure. I mean she was sent here by her Powers for some reason, right? They wouldn't send a zero, especially not after that Lone One she talks about. Wizards who are sloppy or lazy get killed around here! Not like back at home, where you just get poor grades."

"Right, after they take the Oath they get a sort of trail to see if they can handle the power. She said people here get the wizardry when there's a problem that crops up only they can handle, right?"

“Right. So?”

“So, what if The Darkness operates the same way? Presumably it was inside the Dragon for some time, or took it over just as it woke up. Why not wake it up earlier? It awoke in response to Void magic coming to the world. Or Void started because it was going to awaken, never did figure out which came first. The point is, maybe there’s some kind of *Event* that the Darkness has to use, just like wearing a body when it comes to our lower dimensions.”

“Energy saving. Yeah, that makes sense. Why use a bunch of energy just slaughtering everybody if some other thing is scheduled to come along and take a shot at it? Then you just swoop in afterwards and bingo, all you can eat energy buffet. So what you’re saying is, let’s look around for any major events that might take place in this area in the near future, and let The Darkness come to us.”

“That might be easier than checking a whole town’s worth of people.”

“Okay, but if that mountain over there explodes and some dragon slithers out, these people are on their own.”

Sparkle laughed. “Oh really? You wouldn’t pull your sword, scream a battle cry and go charging at the thing?”

“Maybe. If I thought it would look cool, and there was someone around I wanted to impress.”

“Yeah, that’s the criteria to use.” Sparkle’s eyes rolled.

“All that aside, what now? We’ll head back to see Nita I guess, see if she’s come up with anything in the meantime.”

“Sounds good.”

“Now, which way to go to get back?”

Some time later, Susan’s shadow covered Nita, who was laying on a towel, in the sun, in a bathing suit. Her eyes popped open.

“Hard at work I see,” she remarked sarcastically. *Though she does look good in that swim suit. Don’t stare at her legs, don’t stare at her... okay don’t stare at those either.*

“I’m taking a little break,” Nita protested. “Don’t you take breaks?”

Susan had to think for a moment. “Not usually. If I’m not *Fabricating* or *Imbuing* something for someone, I read my book of magic over to make sure I stay familiar with all the spells I have at my disposal. Or I’m picking up a new skill, or helping some old lady with who to give her inheritance to so I can get quest XP. Or scouring a town to see where The Darkness is hiding, which was totally worthless in this case by the way.”

“Even you need to relax sometime!”

“Sure, when I have tens in every skill, every spell memorized, with immortality going and my enemies driven before me. I’ll take a week off. Then I’ll start researching even better spells.”

“Good luck with that,” Nita muttered, closing her eyes again.

“Seriously? You’re just going to lay there?”

“Yes, seriously. I am on vacation at the moment, you know? And I only went sideways when I was wandering around looking at stuff. If I stay put, maybe it won’t happen.”

“You’re not on vacation according to that book you showed me, which said you were on assignment or whatever.”

“And I’m thinking very, very hard about what to do about that, too.”

“As long as you’re still on the job... any events coming up that you know about? Volcanoes overdue to erupt? Nearby rocks about to fall from space? Global disease outbreaks more widespread than they should be? Evil super villains about to break out of supposedly secure prisons? Anything like that, sort of global catastrophe stuff?”

Nita shook her head. “Most exciting thing happening around here is the fox hunt today. They should be by pretty soon actually.”

“Fox hunt? Little barbaric, even for the 90s don’t you think?”

“Oh sure, some company makes... what did you call them? iPads? And suddenly the world isn’t barbaric anymore. Don’t worry, I warned the foxes away days ago. They won’t find one within five miles of this place.”

Susan snorted. "You really did?"

"I really did," she agreed.

"Fine, I guess you can take the afternoon off."

"Thanks, *mom*."

"Say that again?"

"Thanks mom?"

Susan considered. "Mom. Does have a nice ring to it. Ah well, maybe someday. Now about this hunt..."

But the hunt, when it went by, seemed perfectly normal. (If you're into that sort of thing.) A lot of horses, and a guy trying to ride and blow some kind of brass instrument, and people going "hyaaa!" and such. Oh, and barking dogs. Lots of running, barking dogs.

"At least they seem to be enjoying themselves," Sparkle noted.

"I guess, as they don't have Playstations yet. Do they? What video game system do you guys have?"

"Personally? We don't even have a Nintendo," answered Nita. "Too busy with wizardry, really. But a lot of boys at school talk about the Super Nintendo."

"Wow, I never even had one of those. I hear it had some good games though."

"I wouldn't know."

After watching the people on horseback go thundering by, Nita went back to lay down in the sun. Susan glared at her, and wondered if she should say something about sunblock.

*Ah well, they know about that sort of thing in this time, right?*

With only six XP (five gained from her last "adventure" the fight with Bidy) Susan was at a loose end. Especially because her one contact seemed totally indifferent to the problem. *Of course, I'm the one that has to find the thing, so really she's waiting on me!* She paced back and forth around the farm, mostly in the barn as it was now empty of horses.

"You could go back and lay in the sun with Nita," suggested Sparkle. "I've always been of the mind a good nap can't be bad for you."

"No, there must be something I can do. It'll be another few days before I can put XP into anything, if I don't want to save it to convert more of my *Materia*. I just hate the thought of sitting around here doing nothing!"

"You had plenty of that with Louise though."

"Yeah, because I was stuck on that world. Now it seems I'm stuck waiting for The Darkness to show himself."

"The world usually does provide you some adventure to go on, during the lull periods. Maybe something will come up later. Or you could ask *Question* what to do next."

"That works best with yes/no type questions though. Okay, here." Susan got out her book and looked *Question* over. Finally she cast from writings and asked "Is something significant, that leads to my finding The Darkness, going to happen within the next week?"

Yes

"Okay then! Guess I'll just wait."

And so she did. Though she did make some more *Spell Papers*, as she figured she could never really have enough. And of course she put *Avatar of War* back on her sword. That evening, it seemed this farm was the meeting point of the hunt, so riders, the farm hands, Nita, her aunt... everyone crowded into the place to talk and laugh about what had happened. Nita said Susan wouldn't be noticed so she might as well come in and "have tea" with the others, which she did. Her presence wasn't questioned, and Susan was able to feel out everybody in the room to make sure they were all on the up and up.

*And apart from Nita's aunt being a wizard, they all are. Human level energy across the board, and no sign of any dimensional shenanigans. Funny, did Nita tell me her aunt was a wizard? I didn't think so, but I suppose it runs in families just like at home. Have to ask her about it later.*

It was after midnight when the group finally broke up and went their separate ways. Nita and Susan hadn't stayed the whole time, but Susan was glad to help out cleaning the place up.

"Now, you don't have to do that!" Annie said to her. "You're as much a guest as anyone, and as you're still around you and Nita must really have become friends. Sit!"

Susan laughed. "Nope, I'm happy to help out. I've actually been going a bit stir crazy, waiting for whatever it is that's going to happen around here."

"Odd way of putting things."

"Oh, I'm where I need to be, that much is clear. Just a little ahead of schedule, that's all. I suppose that's for the best, letting me get a feel for how things are done around here." Susan meant this as 'the local physical laws as they relate to this reality' but she didn't elaborate.

"Ah." Annie seemed to understand, probably taking it to mean 'Ireland.' "I remember thinking something similar when I first came to Ireland. 'This is where I belong, but what do I do with myself here?' So I understand where you're coming from."

"You seem to have done all right."

"Oh, the farm? Yes, not bad, I suppose."

With the kitchen cleaned up, Susan and Nita said their goodnights and went back out to Nita's trailer. At least, they started to.

"Want to go look at the stars?" Nita suggested. "They're really nice around here."

Susan couldn't think of any reason not to, in particular, so she said sure and the two made their way out to a field where they could get a good view. She had to admit, even with the light cloud cover, there must not be much light pollution in this time and place, as the stars were pretty visible. They stood there, just taking in the night, when Susan heard a wolf howling in the distance.

*Or not that distant, come to think of it. Wait, what has her so spooked?*

Nita was looking around, seeming somewhat surprised.

"What's up?"

"I'm not sure, but there's one thing I can tell you."

"Don't leave me in suspense!"

"There are no wolves in Ireland."

"How in the world do you—" She broke off as the howl sounded again, louder, and Sparkle's ears perked up.

"Hooves," she said. "There's a horse or something being chased around here."

*What's this? Two days of combat in a row? Maybe this world won't short me on XP after all.*

The three peered through the gloom, straining to see in the moonlight that had gone behind a cloud seconds earlier, and they all saw the dark form galloping as fast as it could past the field. The creature was tall, and had antlers, but it didn't look like anything Susan had ever seen. Not hanging around these parts, anyway. She turned to ask Nita if she knew what it was, but saw she was muttering to herself. *Probably casting a spell?*

When she looked back, Susan realized why. The elk or whatever it was wasn't just running along for the heck of it. There were creatures after it. As Susan made her blade appear and held it up for the light, she saw the gray fur of wolves, but not wolves of this world.

*They seem more like those wolf creatures from Cloud's world, that they insisted weren't called wolves at all. Those aren't monsters, they're creatures... and they're coming this way.*

"Don't *attract* them! Put that fire out!"

"No can do," said Susan, shaking her head. "You might want to get out of here, with that overlay of your or whatever that prevents you from using your power." *Huh, maybe I should ask my book for a spell to stabilize an area so she can use her wizardry around here. The book should be able to analyze the area if I leave it out.*

"I'm not leaving you alone!" she protested.

Susan jerked her head back, looking at Nita. She seemed scared, but defiant. "Wow, you have *Overconfident* too? Okay, in that case, just stay inside the circle, okay?"

"What circle?"

"This one. *For Sacrifices Made.*" With those words, Susan's *Legion* activated, and ringed the three of them. The area brightened considerably, and Nita shaded her eyes against the sudden light.

"What in the world-"

"Attack any wolf creature that gets close!" Susan commanded. The soldiers nodded, and went to work.

The ratio of wolf creatures to Susan's soldiers was slightly in favor of the soldiers, and the wolves circled the group to try and find any weak spots. The men of fire attacked bravely, if a magical construct can be said to act with any emotion at all, and with Susan hitting every wolf there for  $(1d10+1d12)/3 + (2d10 \text{ fire damage})/3$  (which worked out to be between 1 and 13 damage every swing) they went down pretty fast. Especially when Sparkle got *Acceleration* going. Nita basically just stood there as the wolves were torn apart, gaping at what was going on. Given how complex a combat with 48 or so individuals would be, we'll just assume they won rather than hashing it out in excruciating detail.

"I am loving *Slash All* for groups!" said Susan, "which I guess is why it was invented in the first place." *If invented is the right word. It seems that world provided something useful to the people that lived there, because they had to fight off groups of "monsters" all the time while walking about. I mean such a thing would be quite useless here most of the time. Wonder if there's something to that...* She lowered her blade, the wolf creatures burning away before her eyes. *I forgot that my STRength is raised by half my Mars rating when I do this spell. Going to have to put more energy into it next time, I only raised it to a ten, which is silly. With a sixteen rating I could have a STRength of 8, plus an effective 2 for being a +1 size modifier larger. And of course the sword gets bigger, and a higher rating makes the fire damage better too! Win-win.*

"Come on," said Nita, "you destroyed the pack, and that'll make whatever is driving them rather angry."

"So let's face him here, rather than have him come looking for us at say... the house?"

"Oh."

The elk stepped out of the darkness, breathing heavily.

"Oh no, he's hurt. Can you use your knife?"

Susan looked down to see the armor had molded itself around the knife, allowing for ease of drawing. Now that she looked at it, the gauntlets she was wearing had five edges, at least on her right side, each with a symbol on them. *My charm bracelet. I bet all I need to do is touch one of those and say the trigger word. This spell rocks! Of course it better, being grade 8! Actually, I'm going to get rid of Invulnerability and Avatar from the bracelet, as my sword does that now for me automatically. Maybe Augment Skill: Sword and... something else?*

"Sure," she replied, transferring the sword to her left hand and pulling the knife. The elk stepped back, warily.

Nita spoke to it, which Susan got 70% of through her *Adaptive* skill. Something about the knife and healing, anyway. The creature didn't spook as Susan approached, which she took to mean "go ahead" and plunged the knife in its side. The wounds healed, and it bowed its head. Then it got the heck out of there.

"That's some healing spell," remarked Nita, looking around cautiously. "It would have taken me five minutes to work even a basic kitting of those wounds."

"Yeah, well, I can't go to the moon, so it's a tradeoff."

"Maybe I can take you when this is all over."

"Hey, I'd really like that!"

Hardly two minutes passed when the figure on horseback appeared out of the mists. Susan had arrayed her soldiers in front of her, five on the outside, then four, then two, and she was in the middle. In this configuration she could have them swarm whatever was coming.

"Get back, let me handle this," she said to Nita.

"Getting back!"

Susan was used to looking down at things with this spell going, but on the horse this thing was riding, she could look it in what would have been eyes if it took the helmet off. Unlike the wolves, she couldn't tell the health level of this thing. *Boss type. Bingo!*

"The Darkness, I presume?" she asked. "Showing yourself at last. It's about time, if I may say so."

"What did you call me?" asked the figure, voice slightly amused.

"The Dark- oh come on. Don't tell me you're some other creature of darkness and evil. How many boss types are around here, anyway? I already fought one wrong being, are you going to waste my time as well?"

"Evil is only seen by those too weak to take what they desire. But I see you're a winner, as my pack seems to have been destroyed."

"Yeah, can't say I'm sorry about that. I like wolves, but these were a little too much. I couldn't have them wandering the countryside, you understand."

"Perhaps. How shall I repay you for the loss, I wonder?"

"Somehow I don't think honorable combat is in the cards."

"Correct! I'll try not to *waste your time!*"

He spurred his horse forward, charging the group and pulling a sword that radiated cold and darkness from somewhere. This was the perfect counterpoint to the sword of fire and light held by Susan. Her *Legion*, commanded to protect her before he even arrived, jumped in the way. Susan slashed upwards with the sword, called shot body, on both the horse and the rider. The horse took two damage while the rider took three. He wasn't able to dodge as he was busy swinging his blade at the line of soldiers on the right side. His blade sheered through two of them, armor and all, in one stroke. This triggered what they were supposed to do in that sort of situation- explode. The man's armor seemed to take the blast, but the horse screamed, taking an additional three damage to the body and 5 damage to a leg.

*Okay, don't let him hit you, their armor is almost as good as mine.*

The horse reared back, and the man fought to get it under control again. "Did you just sacrifice your own troops to try and destroy me?" he asked, a touch of wonder in his voice. "How... me."

"Yeah, and I'm real upset about their loss, as you can see. We doing this thing or what?"

The *Legion* waited, as the horse had danced back a bit, so they didn't see him as attacking now.

"As you can see," the figure continued, "I am quite unharmed by the blast, though I did feel a bit of a tingle as you swung that sword. What was that, exactly?"

"Come down here and you can get a more intimate look."

"No doubt I will, after plucking it from your corpse. However I fear for my horse, should I approach again. As I said, you cannot hurt me with those odd soldiers, so why not dismiss them and let us settle this matter one on one?"

"Don't do it!" hissed Nita. "You can't beat him!"

Susan shrugged. "How do you know what I can and can't do? Anyway, he has a point. You saw how easily he cut two down, and I don't want the horse to get killed. It's innocent, right?"

"I'll miss you."

The figure laughed. "For all your strange power, your friend Nita there seems to have a better grasp on the situation you're in than you do."

"Oh, don't be so sure," said Susan, dismissing the *Legion*. The night was now only illuminated by Susan's flaming blade, and the stars peaking through the thin clouds above. As man slid down off the horse, which backed away, Susan cast *Augment Skill: Sword*, making a

brief flash of magical light swirl around her. "What was that all about?" he asked as he raised his blade.

Susan mirrored the action, replying "You'll find out in a moment," and took a step forward.

"Very well, I'll show you just how small you are!" he cried, leaning forward to begin running.

"You have no idea what you're in for," said both, and charged.

Clash with Evil

Time: 1 Segment later

Place: Field near the farmhouse

Susan, having covered twice the distance as her opponent which seemed to startle him a bit, thrust her sword towards his chest. She knew slashing would be foolish as the armor would just take it, and it would have a better chance of bouncing off.

*Or no, wait, it doesn't matter which kind of strike I use, does it? It's the attack roll that determines if I get through the armor or not. Silly of me, what was I thinking?*

The dark figure before her seemed ready for that, changing his strike into a block at the last second. Sparks flew from the clash, and Susan felt the STREngth of his arms as her strike was deflected.

*I'm holding this sword in two hands, he deflected it with only one. Yeah, this might not be easy.*

"Successful Strike," Sparkle cast on Susan, giving her an eleven bonus on her next swing.

*Or maybe it will?*

Susan attacked again, forcing the figure back a step, surprised at how fast she was moving. Of course she rolled minimum, which was still a twenty one, and ties go to the defender. Again, a great clash and sparks as the swords of cold and fire smashed into each other.

Susan delayed a segment, waiting for Sparkle, as she knew they were both under *Acceleration*. She needn't have worried, another "Successful Strike" came her way immediately. Getting a much better twenty seven, he still managed to block, again as ties go to the defender.

This time, however, Susan had put energy into STREngth, and at this point nearly sheered through her opponent's blade. With the fire and physical damage it had sustained from the repeated hits it was now mangled almost beyond recognition. (Technically the DC was now 7, down from 100. Susan was just that strong now, and even with the icy nature of the blade negating ½ the fire damage, it was pretty beat up.)

Sparkle cast again, as why change a winning strategy, and Susan didn't even have to delay this time as she was now already one segment behind. She swung, intending to shear through the sword and actually hit this guy finally, but her blade whistled through empty air. Her opponent was no longer in front of her, rather several meters back and throwing his now useless sword down.

"Give up?" Susan sneered.

"I don't know how you managed to keep up with me, let alone actually damage my blade, but you'll pay for it. And for the loss of my wolves."

He raised both his hands, speaking gibberish, and a ball of darkness appeared between them.

Susan smiled. *This is The Darkness, I've seen him use that attack before. Pity I don't have another Tom to sacrifice to drive him away this time. Still, I have something better.*

"Mimic," she cried, taking one hand off her blade and thrusting it out boldly before her. She felt something odd, and a sphere of darkness appeared before her.

"Impossible!" cried the figure, holding the orb in front of him, having completed his incantation. "You can't possibly channel the same energy I do!"

"Guess it's just me playing tricks on you then," Susan remarked. "and you have nothing to fear."

"Fear? Me!? I fear nothing!" From the ball a beam of dark energy shot out towards Susan, and her *Mimic Materia*, doing the job it was created for, mirrored the attack. The two beams met closer to Susan than to her opponent, as she was necessarily behind the timing of the attack. Still, when the two met there was a tremendous explosion of energy, throwing everything back and creating a crater in the ground where the forces had clashed.

Susan blinked, her ears ringing, and tried to clear her head. She was flat on her back, but seemed unharmed, the armor surrounding her having taken the blast. Her spell was still

going, and she was still *Accelerated*, so she knew Sparkle was okay. *She was further from the blast and somewhat behind me anyway.*

Something fell on her with the thump, and she squinted up at the dark form of her opponent, now atop her and trying to strangle her with his hands.

"Impossible! Impossible!" he kept shouting. "What are you? How did you work that wizardry? Only I should have access to that power!"

*Okay, so this guy isn't The Darkness then? Because he's certainly acting like he isn't. Whatever.*

"Oh, so the big bad doesn't know everything? I guess you're really not who I've been looking for. And that means my waiting for and fighting you has been a complete waste of my time after all. *Elemental Bolt: Fire!*"

Susan stopped trying to pry his hands away from her armored neck and instead drove them both against his armored body. Spells can be cast on more than one target, and in this case, the spell caused a magical attack to issue from a hand. She just cast it concentrating on both hands, and got two magical fire attacks for the price of one. The only downside was the -2 to the attack. Of course, it didn't really matter, as she couldn't miss, him being atop her and everything. She threw maximum energy into them, which for her was now twenty three, as she had made a *Spirit Manipulation* check while she was talking. This slammed him with a total of over fifty damage, and he staggered back off of her.

He looked down, two holes in his armor and dripping blood.

"Imposs-" He vanished.

Susan made a check to stand up in a single action, then grabbed for her sword and looked around. Sparkle and Nita were just getting up, and both the figure and horse were gone.

"That seems to be that," Susan said, offering a hand to Nita. "You okay? Want the knife?"

"I'm fine, just winded. What happened?" She looked over at the hole in the ground, dimly lit from the fire along Susan's blade. "Is He gone?"

"Yeah, I won. We better go though, that noise was sure to attract attention. And I don't want to be the one explaining where it came from. You okay, Sparkle?"

"I'll be fine," came her voice as she padded up to the pair out of the darkness.

"Wait, you won? How is that... no, you're right. Come on."

Susan felt her spells end, the scene over, and reabsorbed her blade. The two made their way over to Nita's trailer, and she let them all inside.

She snapped on the light. "Okay, you're going to tell me who you are."

"What are you talking about?" Susan was genuinely confused. "I have told you."

"No way. You just drove off the Lone Power in physical combat! And I saw you use the same attack He did at the end. There's no way you could have done that, it was wizardry!"

"So? He wasn't even really that tough, if you want to put a fine point on it."

"*Not really-* He's death! What did you do to him?"

"I beat him. Look, I'm not sure he's The Darkness or not, but he seems close enough. He has to obey the rules while he's here, just like The Darkness does. Oh sure, he might have a little extra knowledge, a little extra power, but he's limited by the body he finds himself in. That's why Darkness has always gone for, to be honest, people like me, or huge dragons or whatever. So he can be as powerful as a dimension allows."

Nita shook her head. "No, you don't get it. I've seen Him at work. When I rescued my sister from Him, He was throwing around forces you can't believe. And in the end He was dark and terrible and hardly physical at all."

"Really? I have to wonder. I mean if that's true, why not just kill you? We're really quite fragile when it comes down to it."

"Believe me, he was trying."

"Well, he was trying with me, and we both survived. So why the surprise?"

"But I didn't drive him off. My sister did something, I'm still not sure what. She doesn't like to talk about it."

"Ah, okay, if you say so. Your much younger sister, who had wizardry what, a day, you said? She beat your guy but it's all shock and awe when I do? If he's so terrible and powerful,

why not just, I don't know, drop a big rock on you from space? Do it while you're asleep and his problem is solved. There must be a million ways to kill wizards without getting near them, for someone as determined as he no doubt is. I mean you have sniper rifles around here, right?"

"So what are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe he's not all that. Maybe, like The Darkness, he's more limited than you want to believe, and he's used trickery to make you think he's not every time you've seen him."

"I can't see that being true."

"What's the alternative? That a couple of kids can really beat up the thing that invented death? Basically a god? I buy my explanation more than I buy yours. Sorry. I mean, hand me your manual."

Nita handed it over and Susan paged through it.

"Right here. Creation story- The main power of the universe wanted us all to exist, so that being created lesser beings and told them to get busy. They were each given a bit of power to do what they needed to do. Well, your guy took his power and created death. The others found out, but it was too late. That energy had been spent, so it was gone. What was left? A bunch of beings that had served their purpose, spent their energies, and now needed something else to do with their existence. Real great foresight there on the part of your big kahuna. Well, your guy now goes around making your life miserable, but what power does he have to back it up with? He spent his creation energy making death. Now all he has is what you've got. Wizardry. There's nothing he can do that you couldn't do with study and dedication. Right?"

"But He's a power!" Nita protested.

"He was. But he wants to come here and he has to take a physical body to do it. That's what I was fighting. He took the body of a swordsman, I met him as a swordsman. He didn't expect my speed or skill, because they were magically enhanced. Then he threw wizardry at me, and I used my *Mimic Materia* to throw it back at him. At that point he lost it, got in close, and I threw fire at him point blank. I don't care who you are, that kind of damage is going to hurt."

"You're saying everything I've seen him do; dousing the sun, throwing around energy bolts, that was all a trick?"

"Possibly. He wants you to think he's all powerful so you don't seriously go after him. So you stay afraid to try and keep thinking you're nothing compared to him. And from what you just told me, that's exactly what's happened! So he's done his work well. This last time, according to this," she flipped the book to the back, where the record of her "adventures" was kept, "you put up a shield, let him bash at you a bit, then tried teleporting him home. It sort of worked, but he was back in seconds. Did you try any wizardry to cause him *actual harm*? Did your partner Kit? He's still only one being, three wizards working together could have slipped past his defenses, yes? While he's fending off a fireball from one quarter you smack him with a lightning bolt from another, while your sister throws saw blades at his legs. How could he counter all that? I mean the teleport thing worked, so wizardry can touch him. You should have been exploding his brains not just distracting him for a moment. But you didn't attack, none of you did. I mean your partner just stood there like a lump, why is he even a wizard in that case? You didn't even try from what I read here. What, exactly, did you think you were doing there? I mean you went there weaponless!"

"I thought I was there to rescue my sister."

"Yes, and a fat lot of good it did you. She saved you, with that thing she doesn't like to talk about. In fact even if you had never shown up, things would have worked out just fine. She didn't need you at all, so what was the point?"

"You weren't there, you don't know what it was like!"

"Yes, that's true. But I was here, and I fought, and I won. Because I tried. You didn't. So don't look so shocked and demand to know what I am when I do. I've told you. I'm Susan Felton, dimensional traveler and Natural Magician, and that's all there is to it."

"Uh, is this a bad time?" asked another voice from the door. Both girls froze and slowly turned their heads. They were standing close to each other, and Susan had been waving the

“So You Want to Be a Wizard” book in the air while shouting at Nita. Nita’s hands were clenched into fists, and it seemed she was trying to hold herself back from doing something she might come to regret. There in the doorway stood her aunt, eyes wide as she took in the scene. “I came to see if you girls were okay, and I heard shouting. Sorry for barging in like this.” She started to close the door.

“Wait, we were just, uh, talking,” said Nita, jumping away from Susan and yanking the door open again. “We’re fine, why wouldn’t we be?”

“Something exploded out in the field, and the place is all torn up. I just wanted to make sure you were both okay.”

“Exploded? Any idea what?” asked Susan, tossing the book down. Annie’s eyes flicked to it, then back to Susan. She looked around the room, where it was quite obvious two girls were living.

“No. Are you... staying here?”

“Ah, for the moment?” Susan hedged, “We didn’t tell you because, uh, well there are... the thing is...”

Annie put her hands up. “It’s none of my business. But Nita, your folks sent you here because they thought you needed to get away from Kit for a while. Did you immediately jump into bed with... her? Should I tell them not to worry, or to be more worried than ever?”

Nita blushed furiously. “No I did not!” she protested. “Why is everyone always thinking that about me? Honestly, there’s just... stuff going on. It’s complicated, and it’s fine.”

“If you ever want to talk, I’m here.”

“Aarg, there’s nothing to talk about!”

“There really isn’t,” put in Susan, perhaps a little more wistfully than one would expect.

“And your being a, what did you call yourself? A natural magician?”

“I am.”

“Uh huh.” She glanced at Nita as if to ask “is this girl insane?”

“It’s fine, Aunt Annie. I know what she’s talking about. Thank you for coming to check on us.”

“Right. I’ll be up the house if you need anything.”

“Thanks. Good night.”

“Night.”

“Sorry if I got you in trouble,” Susan said a moment after she left. Nita put her book away again and flopped down on the bed.

“It’s fine,” Nita said, waving it away. “Sorry for shouting at you. I was just a bit shocked at what happened, that’s all.”

“That’s not an uncommon reaction when she’s around,” said Sparkle. “I think she delights in it.” Susan nodded quickly, a strange smile on her face. “Yeah, figured. Should we be worried that thing will come back tonight? Should we keep a watch?”

“He’s never attacked me in my bed before,” Nita said with a shrug. “Which, now that you mention it, would be the preferred strategy to get rid of us wizards. The fact He doesn’t must mean something, but I’m not sure what.”

“It’s something to think about, anyway,” said Susan.

“The other thing to think about is what just happened,” said Sparkle. “You say there aren’t wolves around here, but those things weren’t wolves. And what about that hooped creature? You might have been busy so I did a reading on it. It wasn’t from around here either. So did the big bad make all that happen for some reason or did the hunt begin and just spilled over into our world?”

“That’s an excellent point,” admitted Nita. “I didn’t get a good look at the size of that hole, but it’s bound to cause some questions. How did you do that, anyway?”

Susan pulled her sleeve up and showed Nita her *Wizard Bracelet*. “This. A little something I collected the last place I visited.” *Wizard Bracelet... now that I think about it, is this thing I’m wearing the very definition of irony on this world?*

She looked the slightly glowing spheres over, found the one she wanted, and popped the *Mimic Materia* off it so she should show Nita. “This. It’ll let me do anything I see done,

special power wise. Magic, spirit energy, any kind of supernatural power. I just threw an exact copy of his energy attack back at him. That's all."

"Far out." She handed it back.

"First time I was able to use it. I think it'll be worth the XP cost to convert over. So, what do we do?" She put the sphere back, winced as the sword went back into her hand, and healed the wound with the knife.

"Get some local help, I suppose. We'll need to thicken the walls around here somehow, keep things like that from happening again."

"Can you though? I mean this magic pollution you talked about..."

"If we get some wizards who focus on keeping things in check while the others work, it should be fine."

"Is that lone power to blame, then?" asked Sparkle. "I mean if he's causing this directly so he can have fun chasing stuff from other worlds into this one, he'll be resisting your efforts."

"Good thing we have someone here that can beat the snot out of him," she replied with a grin.

"Oh yeah, thanks for the assist by the way," said Susan. "You've never used *Successful Strike* like that, have you?"

"Never needed to, that was your first real sword fight. Aerith's world doesn't count."

"True. Worked pretty well."

"Good to know, I'll keep it up. As long as it's just one opponent, anyway. *Elemental Line* is better for groups."

"You hit those wolves with it a time or two, right?"

"I did."

"Thought they went down pretty fast. All right. I guess we'll get some sleep and in the morning, consult the wizard book about who to talk to that can help us out."

"You know," said Nita thoughtfully, "If it was Him directly maybe you driving him off like you did will have solved the problem already. I mean I doubt it, but we can hope, right?"

"Sure. It would solve your problem, anyway. I still have mine, where is The Darkness hiding? That battle didn't seem epic enough for my guy, based on past experience. He likes to put on a show, smash a mountain or two or grow a wing or six. You know, bad guy stuff. One deer or whatever that was? Nah, not his style. That attack was so similar though, I was sure it was him."

"You would know better than me," said Nita.

"He could still have been acting," said Sparkle. "Trying to throw us off, keep looking rather than focus on finding him now that we've seen him."

"Yeah. Well, he'll be back one way or the other I guess. I mean if I was him, I would want the body of the local embodiment of death, right? That's where the power would be."

"But maybe he's smart enough to know you would guess that, and so stayed away from that body figuring that's how you would think."

"So it's a game of cat and mouse, and I can't be sure who the mouse is?"

"But I'm the cat," said Sparkle, flexing her claws. "What does that make you?"

"The cat's very, very good friend."

Both laughed.

Oh the things she knows

Time: The next day

Place: Bidy's Farm

"So what are we doing out here again?" asked Nita, looking around. The two girls, having *Teleported* to the farmhouse Susan had battled Bidy, were now standing on her front step about to ring her doorbell.

"Seeing what she knows. She did say that we should ask her if we needed help. You want to go visit wizards in the area. Not sure what good that will do us, they will no doubt be as clueless as we are right now. All of you having the same information from that... where did you put your book anyway?"

"Otherspace. Carefully, because of the magical radiation around here."

"Ah, right. Anyway, if the book could tell us the answer, it would have already. It obviously can't or won't, so we'll go ask the next best thing- one of the people that helped make the world around here."

"Usually we go up the chain of command, so to speak. I should be talking with other local wizards, then if they think it's appropriate, to the area senior."

Susan laughed. "Area senior? You have a girl (and cat) from another world wandering around who has told you about a creature of malevolence that wants to cut your "branch" off from the "tree" and take the power of your dimension for itself. What do you think another wizard at your level is going to do about that? I need to find the Darkness or the "event" that The Darkness is going to use to trigger the extinction event here. That should hopefully solve your problem of going sideways."

"Why do you figure that?"

"Easy. With The Darkness gone, whatever event is getting set up around here goes away, and things go back to normal."

"I guess you could be right. Do you hear a banging?"

They stood and listened. There was a rhythmic banging coming from the direction of the forge, at least Sparkle's ears swiveled in that direction.

"No," said Susan, her *Poor Sense* weakness once again making a brief appearance.

"Come on, she's probably working at this hour."

Susan followed her into the back, where indeed, Bidy was working on something long, pointy, and probably sharp.

"Making something for our rematch?" asked Susan, looking it over. Bidy didn't turn, continuing her pounding on the glowing iron whatever it was she was making.

"Are we... having a... rematch?" she asked between swings.

"Only if you want to lose to me a second time."

"Please, we're here to ask for her help!" said Nita, glaring over at Susan. "Not bicker about past misunderstandings."

"Misunderstandings, right," said Bidy.

"The truth is, if you can tell us what's going on, maybe we can fix it and all get back to our normal lives. I can move on, everyone's happy."

"Little busy right now," she said, shoving the object back into the forge fire.

"I'll wait," said Susan, crossing her arms and leaning against the wall. Bidy glanced over at her, sighed, and went back to work.

Some time later, Nita, who had been watching her quite closely, spoke up again. "What are you making, exactly? It looks like a weapon."

"I'm just getting back into practice," she explained. "I have a feeling I'm going to be making the real thing soon enough."

"What real thing? This one isn't real enough for you?" asked Susan.

"Not in the way you would understand it. Look, I can stop soon, just let me work here, okay?"

"Okay."

Finally she left the metal to cool and stripped off her heavy gloves. "All right, let's go up to the house for some tea and we can talk."

*Ugh, more tea.*

"So what do you want to know?" she asked, cup in hand. The girls were sitting at her kitchen table, which looked perfectly ordinary in every way. Susan looked around, considering.

"What?"

"You're some kind of other worldly being, right? One of the original creators of the world?"

"She doesn't mean any disrespect!" Nita hastened to put in.

"It's fine. Actually, meeting someone that doesn't go all weak at the knees on meeting me is kind of novel." Her eyes narrowed a bit over her cup. "Just don't take it too far."

"Right, wouldn't want to have to beat you up again," said Susan, taking a sip. "The point is, don't people notice?"

"Notice what? Is there something in here that shouldn't be?" She looked around.

"What, no, the place is incidental. I mean don't they notice you're not aging? I mean you've been around since the beginning, right? How do you do it? Shape-shifting? Magic to keep people from thinking about it too much? Illusion?"

"Is that really what you came here to talk about?"

"No, just a thought I had. Okay, to business then. What's going on around here that's allowing people to travel to other realities so easily?"

"And how do we put a stop to it?" continued Nita.

"More than likely it's about time for a reenactment around here. Probably the battle involving Balor that took place here some time ago."

"Another one?" groaned Nita. "The last one nearly got me killed, I only got off on a technicality." Susan looked at her questioningly. "'Read the fine print!' the bird tells me. HA! No more agreeing to stuff without knowing what I'm getting into for me, that's for sure."

"Okay, you two know what you're talking about, but I don't. Care to share?"

"Places that experience pivotal moments in history, and wizardry, tend to remember them," Bidy began. "This can cause them to repeat somewhat, and cause trouble for us now. Thus, the wizards of today have to go and fill the rolls that were played by wizards in the past. This puts the events to rest for a time and everything goes back to normal."

"And this Balor fellow?"

"Another name and form the Lone Power took."

"Oh, that guy I made retreat last night, right. But if he was defeated before, what's the danger of this 'recording' as you put it?"

"That's just the thing, he's a Power, like I am. He doesn't exist in the same time as you do. If that 'recording' of him should be unopposed, or if the wizards of today lose... well, he would be free to continue doing whatever it was he was trying to do the first time."

Susan looked thoughtful for a moment, then nodded. "That which holds the image of the Weeping Angel becomes an Angel." The others looked curiously at her. "Just something from my world. Maybe you'll get it in twenty years or so. The point is, to make sure I'm understanding this correctly, we need to enact a kind of play to keep the image of Balor in check. Except if you die in the play, you actually die. And if everybody dies, things here get much, much, worse."

"That's about the size of it."

"And that's why you're forging a weapon?" Nita asked.

"That's why I'm practicing forging a weapon. Like I said, the real one will have to be made of sterner stuff."

"Not sure what that means but given a little time, my magic can make anything you forge practically indestructible."

"I'll keep that in mind. Meanwhile, you'll need to find the other 'props' so that the play goes on smoothly."

"Ah, a fetch quest!" said Sparkle. "That's good for XP all right."

"Yeah, shouldn't be a problem," said Susan excitedly. "What are they?"

“The physical embodiments of the four elements. The spear, that’s what I’m working on, is fire. You need to find the others. At least, something that can serve to represent the elements. The old objects that held the power are still around here, I can get you the address of the museum you’ll find two of them in. The rock is just sitting out in a field someplace north of here. If you can rekindle their power, they can serve again. If not, find another object that’s similar and can hold the spirit of the element. Don’t worry about moving the rock or anything, it can stay right where it is. Just wake it up.”

“Hey, I’m not going to carry around... okay, I probably would show off by yanking it out and bringing it.”

“Wow, she knows you that well already?” asked Sparkle.

Susan stuck her tongue out at her.

“Does this all solve your problem though?” asked Nita.

“It sounds like it. If I know The Darkness, and I like to think I do, that’s where it’ll be. This ‘recording’ of yours sounds like a good place to camp out and gather power from. It’ll have taken the image over, augmented it with whatever skills or powers the body can support, and use it as a jumping off point. Plus the timing is right, this one event, just days before I arrived? That’s our guy.”

“Okay. Get us the address and we’ll go take a look at these objects. Should we bring them back here, or what?”

“I’m really not supposed to be helping even this much, you know,” Bidy protested.

“This all is what we made wizards for. Give the objects to them.”

“Oh, right. The bunch of you let one of your own invent death, and now it’s up to us to clean it up- until the end of time. Even though you’re supposed to be like gods around here, you spend your time repairing horseshoes. Right.”

“Don’t push it, little traveler,” Bidy growled. “I could take my real form and crush you. It would mean the end of this persona, but that might be a small price to pay.”

“Oh, so your buddy the Lone Power doesn’t have a monopoly on destroying things, huh? I’m just calling them like I see them, okay?”

“Girls, please, we’re all on the same side,” said Nita, standing up and pulling Susan up with her. “Can we get that address, please?”

“Sure.” Bidy dashed off an address on some paper and thrust it at Nita. “Hopefully you won’t need any more of my help after this.”

“You’ve been a big help, thank you. We’ll do our best.”

“If you change your mind though, decide you want to protect this land you seem to love, you know where to find us,” Susan called as Nita pulled her out the door. Sparkle followed.

“What’s your problem?” Nita asked as the three walked away from the house.

“My problem is with people that have power and don’t use it. My father got his amazing magic and abilities for a reason- to save his world and others from The Darkness. I inherited it and have taken up his fight. I have the magic, and I’ve always used it to help whomever I could. But her? She’s one of the original beings but she may as well be powerless for all the good any knowledge of wizardry does her. Even doing things on the sly- how many stupid, pointless deaths have happened while she was putzing around with her silly forge? And if she’s any indication, her fellow creators are just as bad, sitting around letting you wizards take the risks to fix their mistakes!”

“Oh,” said Nita after a moment. “I’m starting to understand you a little, I think. That’s why you can’t just sit in the sun on a lazy afternoon, isn’t it? You have to be doing something, anything, because you feel your power demands it. You have spider-man syndrome.”

Susan snorted. “Spider-man syndrome? That’s a new one. But sure, that’s one way of putting it. That, and wasting time here means another day my father and Luna are out there, somewhere, lost or captured or whatever. My father knew the risks, and Luna did too, but we were supposed to face them together. I let her down, and I have to fix that. I can’t move forward until this world is safe, because even I can’t weigh one life against an entire dimension.”

“Let’s get started then.”

“Finally.”

The pair rode the bus to the address given to them by Bidy, which was a museum.

“What exactly are we looking for?” asked Susan, looking around.

“I guess something that embodies an element?” hedged Nita. “We know fire and earth aren’t here, so something that represents water and air. You can feel things out, right?”

“Guess we’ll have to. Bidy could have mentioned exactly what we were looking for.”

“Maybe she would have, if you had been nicer.”

“I’ll choose to believe I was as nice as I could be, and she was the jerk. It would seem to fit my worldview better that way.”

Nita rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

The three poked around, looking at ancient art, artifacts, and stuff people of the time would have thrown out as trash. Nita was drawn back to a chalice; a two feet high metal cup, encrusted with jewels and seemingly made of gold. It wasn’t just sitting out for any fool to grab, however, it was locked in a case made of thick glass. A spotlight from above shone down on it, and Susan wandered over to her.

“You think this?” she asked, pointing to the cup.

“See those designs? Those are old binding spells, engraved into the metal. And if you feel it out, it feels like it’s sleeping.”

“Sleeping, huh?” Susan tried *Magic Sense*, (minimum, an 8) *Spirit Sense* (even worse, a 7), *Dimension Sense* (an 11) and felt nothing. She said as much.

“Can you even feel wizardry?”

“Not sure. I can tell if an active spell is on something, or if it has spiritual power, but if what Bidy said was true, this cup has neither. And it was made around here, so it wouldn’t show up to *Dimension Sense*. You getting anything, Sparkle?”

“Not a thing.”

“There you go. Still, a cup for water would fit. We just need to get it out of there and wake it up. I guess you’ll have to handle the second part. I can handle the first.”

“Are you crazy?” Nita hissed, eyes darting about. “You aren’t just going to swipe it are you?”

Susan barked a laugh. “I’m not dumb, you know. I’ll wait until we’re outside at least. Gosh, you think I want security guards after me? I might hurt them accidentally, that would be no good.”

“Thank goodness for- wait, how could you get it while you were outside?”

Susan touched her nose. “Magic.”

“You’re impossible!”

“Tell me something I don’t know. Okay, so look for that funny writing, huh? Maybe we can find something for air too. She said both were here.”

Susan didn’t expect to find much, given her failure with the cup, but she could look for weird writing on stuff with the best of them. They both looked for about an hour, but apart from a really old sword Nita thought might have been suitable once, they didn’t find anything promising.

“Wouldn’t they decay at the same rate though?” asked Susan as they walked out of the building. “I mean they must have been used at the same time, whenever the last ‘reenactment’ was performed.”

“I think it depends on a lot of things,” explained Nita. “How skilled was the person that put the spirit of the element into the object? How much care was taken creating the vessel? How powerful is the spirit?”

“Wait, they must all be the same power level.”

“Not necessarily. Which is there more of in Ireland? Air or fire? Water or earth?”

“Only the Avatar can master all four- never mind. So does a stronger spirit decay faster or slower? The vessel might not contain a stronger spirit as long as a weaker one. But a weaker one would have less far to go to become useless. So again, wouldn’t that balance out?”

“You got me. So can you really steal the cup?”

“Sure. You want it now or what?”

"We'll have to study it, see if we can wake it up. We had better do it someplace out of the way, though. I don't want someone coming by and seeing us staring intently at a cup made of a million dollars' worth of solid gold."

"Wow, was gold that high in the 90s?"

"You know what I mean!"

"Okay. We could take it to my workshop, plenty of room there with all that potion making stuff gone."

"Workshop? What workshop?"

"The one I keep in my pocket. You'll see. For now let's head back to your place. We'll step in and out from there, save us time later."

"Okay. I hate to just steal it though."

"We can give it back later. Again, it's about using the power properly. What good is the cup doing the world just sitting in that case there? And we aren't melting it down or anything, the cup will still exist. It'll just be doing the job it was created to do, rather than gathering dust in that case."

"Can it gather dust in that case?" asked Sparkle. "It looked pretty solid to me."

"Dust finds a way."

"I thought that was life?"

"Works for a lot of things. Love, mustard stains, getting senpai to notice me..."

"Getting what?" asked Nita.

"Look it up in fifteen years or so."

"Yeah, I- I'll do that. That aside, shouldn't we, I don't know, hand it over to some better wizards?"

Susan gave her a "don't you trust me?" look. "Believe me, I can become better than any wizards you have around here. I can make you better, too. With the three of us working on it, I'm sure we'll have the cup cracked in no time. And by cracked, I mean fixed."

"The three of us? Who's the third?"

"Me," said Sparkle indignantly. "I have the *Adaptive* skill, same as she does. And I think I know what she has in mind, too."

"Do tell."

"Cheating."

"It's only cheating if you get caught. Come on."

So the three made their way back to the trailer, and slipped around behind it. Susan had gotten out her notes on *Personal Dimension*, a spell she still needed to cast from writings. She did a quick *Retrieval* and handed the cup over to Nita, who stared it at.

"I'm really holding it."

"Yeah, did you think we came all the way back here so I could say 'whoops, I can't magically magic it into my hand after all. How stupid am I?' and giggle? No, we came to study it, and that's what we're going to do. Besides, you could have done it with wizardry, right? I mean if you can go to the moon (as you claim) then you must be able to talk an object into your hand." *Though, as usual, I'm the only one doing any magic around here.*

"I suppose normally, yes. I wouldn't want to try it around here without some precautions though."

*And that's the other reason for suggesting my Personal Dimension. This will require wizardry, and thus far apart from a small light spell and knocking herself out, I haven't seen my new friend here do much of that stuff. I'd like to see what she can do, before I go to do some kind of highly dangerous reenactment with her. I'd like to know what she's capable of.*

"Fair enough," she said. "Now it'll take some time to open this, don't disturb me, please."

With that, Susan started casting the nine minute spell (double that because of doing it from writings) but cutting it down some with energy. *Higher grade spells are so weird. The higher grade spell of Dimension Gate only takes two seconds, while Legion would normally take twenty minutes. I guess magic really is unfathomable.*

The spell completed, Susan beckoned Nita inside, and both stepped in. Nita took in the gently sloping hillside that ended in Susan's cottage by the lake.

"Are those solar panels on your little house down there?" she asked, squinting into the distance.

"Yeah, they keep my refrigerator running. Had to get rid of most of the food, I couldn't access this place for a bit. I should put a permanent spell of 'food not spoiling' on it somehow. Anyway, come see, and we can get work."

Susan started down the hill, Sparkle and a somewhat impressed Nita trailing along behind them.

Nita continued to be impressed as she looked about the workshop and the surrounding area. The lake, pond, trees, grass, and clouds were all as Susan remembered them.

*And if they weren't, what exactly would that mean?*

"Where are we, exactly?" asked Nita, having poked around the place.

"Good question," Susan answered. "I never stopped to consider the physical locality of my *Personal* and *Pocket Dimensions*. They come along with me when I transit to other realities, so they aren't tied to that. But yet the objects inside exist, and if I died they would all come tumbling out on top of my corpse. And it was explained to me that any object unique to a world would get left there, even inside here, hence the need for the sub-space pocket."

"Even the house?" she asked, shocked.

"No, no, the house was part of the *Dimension*. I envisioned it the first time I cast the spell, along with the lake, the mountains, the caves under the mountains, the trees, all of it. Take any part of the original envisioning out of here, and it would just vanish. No, only the stuff I brought in here afterwards would appear. Humm, how does that work?" Susan made a *Topics: Dimension* check, getting a twelve. "Maybe the objects are rooted to me, but out of phase with local reality? Then the magic is simply reorienting them when it's cast."

"I don't suppose it matters. I just wondered if I could come up with something similar."

"Why not? Your magic is about describing things, right? And you obviously have a similar 'spell' to my *Pocket Dimension* that you keep stuff in. Just describe yourself a little hideaway."

"Just describe it, she says. Do you know how complex that would be? You would have to name each and every blade of grass, every rock, every piece of timber in a house—"

"So just make the ground and build everything else yourself."

Nita considered. "That would actually be easier. It's so weird, all this." She spread her hands to indicate everything she saw outside. "I'm usually pretty good with life, and this stuff *looks* alive, like that's a tree over there. But it doesn't *feel* alive. It's kind of freaky."

"Well, yeah, it's just magic in a certain shape. It wouldn't grow or change, or die. I mean I wouldn't want to have to come in here and cut the grass every week, now would I?" She laughed.

"I don't suppose you would. It's not fair, you getting to just cast one spell and get all this."

"Yeah, well, it's not fair that I had to leave home and track down my father, either. Or come here to save your reality from being gobbled up. But what can you do?"

"I see what you mean. Well," she hefted the cup, "shall we get to work?"

Susan smiled broadly. "Oh yeah, cheating time!"

"You said that before, what did you mean?"

"Set it down over here and I'll show you."

The two went into the workshop part of the cabin, and Nita put the cup down on the potion stained table.

"This area's seen a lot of activity," she remarked.

"Yup, good times, good times. Now, for a bit more magic!"

Susan grabbed some paper out of a nearby notebook, and for several minutes created three new *Spell Papers*. When she was done she handed one to Nita. "Now, to activate it, just put your hand over it, think about getting better at wizardry, and say 'activate.'"

"And it'll make me better at wizardry?" she asked, unconvinced.

"That's the hope. If not you, then at least Sparkle and myself. See, the description for *Augment Skill* specifically says 'This does not provide a bonus to any Planet skills.' Like somehow the magic knows one skill is different than another. But whatever. This isn't a planet skill. Now as I see it, your skill at wizardry is broken up into at least two parts. Reading the language in your book and your pronunciation of the words. I remember a story from my world

about these robots, right? Only one person in the world could control them perfectly because you had to tell them what you wanted them to do, and only she could get the pronunciation of the words right. Now maybe you have a third skill, some 'magic doing' skill? I don't know. Point is, my magic should figure out what you need to get better if you ask it. Now me, I'm not your type of magic user. But I have a single skill, granted to me by nature of me moving between realities. That of *Adaptive Skill*. This takes the place of whatever you do in order to do wizardry, that lets me do wizardry. On another world, it might let me use the Force or whatever."

"Wasn't that from a movie?"

"You get the idea. Upshot is, that isn't a Planet skill either. So I can *Augment* it, far beyond the levels of whatever normal humans can do in this world."

"In other words, cheating."

"Isn't it great!?" Susan was excited.

"I guess if it gets the job done. But why this? You do magic without this, I've seen you." She held up the *Paper*.

"It's about how I cast magic. I could cast it on all three of us at once, maintain it once, but take a -3 penalty. Or cast it three times, take no penalty to the casting, but have to maintain it three times! That would mean a -6 to everything I did, making me useless for this effort. These," she indicated the *Papers*, "work around that."

"More cheating?"

"If you like. The symbol on the paper holds the spell rather than myself. It's like a one time use *Imbuing* without all the time, effort, XP or monetary cost. This gives us the best of both worlds, I don't have to maintain it even once, and there's no penalty to me, despite my benefiting from the whole deal."

"Guess we'll see what happens." She put her hand on it and magic swirled around her as she spoke the trigger word. Susan and Sparkle followed suit, and checked their character sheets. Their ratings were now rather obscenely high in *Adaptive Skill*, given the energy Susan had put into the spell, and the three got to work.

With a now greater understanding of Wizardry than ever before, the three worked off Nita's copy of 'So you Want to be a Wizard' and created a new spell to put the soul of water back into the cup. Susan found she could read and understand the language of the book perfectly now, and while her understanding of the forces needed to bring the 'spirit' of water back to the cup were incomplete, both her and Sparkle were able to make assist checks in writing the actual spell.

"I have to say, creating spells in Wizardry is much easier than creating them in magic," remarked Susan when they were done. "It takes me days, and I have to 'consume materials' which I still don't quite understand the purpose of. We just kind of dashed that off."

"It's usually not this easy though," countered Nita. "Your spell must really be working."

"Naturally, as Simon the Chipmunk would say at Christmas time."

"Don't let her fool you. She used more than half her considerable amount of energy to create those spell papers," said Sparkle. "You really do like throwing energy around, don't you?"

"It was important. And it's not like we can get attacked here. I've gotten 8 back already, sitting here is 'light activity' after all."

"Who cares how she did it, the important thing is I think we can wake this cup up, and we're a quarter of the way to what we need. I really thought we should be talking to other wizards, but you've come through, Susan. I'm... sorry I doubted you."

"Eh, everyone does. They come around in the end. Now, what's next? Just reading it aloud? I mean do I have to make checks to understand it or anything? Casting from writings for me is kind of involved."

"Nope, we just read it. Though I'm not really sure what 'make checks' means."

"And I doubt I could explain it to you. Okay, can you see all right, Sparkle?"

She put her front paws up on the table and stretched up. The other two tilted the paper and she nodded.

"Oh, just a second!" said Susan, and wrote "And now we begin the spell." in English at

the top. (Luckily these people seemed to speak and read English just fine) “We’ll read that first, as we’ll all have to be in sync, right? That way if we’re off right away we’ll know it.”

Nita seemed vaguely impressed, and the three began to read.

The *Dimension* was quiet, as there was not any such thing as wind to rustle leaves, or scores of birds chirping. No cars, no sirens, just a faint babble of water as it flowed past the cottage. Nevertheless, something odd started happening as the three read the spell. Somehow it seemed to grow even quieter, the voices of the three blending together and calling forth power. Almost if the magic that made up the objects in this *Dimension* were listening to the spell that was building up around them.

*It feels different than magic*, Susan thought, about halfway through the spell. *How about that.*

As their voices died away, the three looked eagerly to the cup, which sat unchanged upon the table.

Susan tapped the side of it. “Uh, did it work?”

“I don’t- I don’t think so. That’s odd. A spell always works.”

“Wait, what? No it doesn’t, you backfired your *Teleport* spell when I was fighting Biddy!”

“Let me clarify- a spell always does something. Not always what you expect, but we used wizardry, I felt that much. But this cup doesn’t seem any more awake than it was before.”

“Should we try again?” asked Sparkle.

Nita shook her head. “We read the spell perfectly, with my abilities augmented I could tell that. Reading it again won’t have any different outcome.”

“Maybe it’s too far gone,” suggested Susan. “Maybe we’ll have to start with a new cup, do the binding from scratch.”

“That would be... less than ideal.”

“I agree, but what other option do we have? It didn’t work.”

“I’m not sure. Let me think a minute.”

“Sure.”

Susan got out some drinks from her fridge and sat sipping hers as Nita paced around. She looked at the cup, silently read the spell over again, and scowled at nothing. “As much as it pains me, I think I’ll try to reach my sister, Dairine. She might have some ideas.” Nita closed her eyes, standing still a moment.

*Is she doing a spell, or what? I thought they had to speak them?*

“That’s odd,” Nita said at last, opening her eyes. “It’s always been easier with Kit, but I should at least be able to... I’ll try it the other way.” She went over to her book and tried sending a message through it, but was surprised when it threw some kind of error message back at her.

“It must be because we’re in here,” she said at last, closing the book. “I’ve never seen a message like that before.”

“What do you want to do? The spell will expire if we leave here, it’ll be the end of the ‘scene.’ I don’t mind casting it again, but one more round of those at that level is all I have in me for today.”

“No, it’s all right. Scene...” she chuckled. “Your magic sure is weird. Now can we go to another wizard in the area? Get a second opinion?”

“Sure. I’m not against working with others or anything, but didn’t you yourself say, when we met, that the wizardry put the wizard who could solve the problem on the case? It picked you, and you came to Ireland. Doesn’t that mean you have to work it out yourself?”

“It’s not a cut and dried thing. Yes, it can mean the wizard has to take care of it, but that’s usually just when we’re starting out. Otherwise it can mean I’m just the one to get the ball rolling.”

“Oh, I get it. Come along then.” She shoved the cup into her sub-space pocket and reached for the writings to open the door and get them back to the real world again.

The girls (and cat) got some lunch, and Nita honestly told her Aunt they had been poking around museums that morning, and were going to go look at some old castles in the

area that afternoon.

"Heaven knows we have enough of them around here!" said Annie. "I'm glad to see you enjoying yourself."

"Did anything come up about that explosion?" asked Susan.

Annie shook her head. "No gas pipes or anything in that area. No charred remains from a conventional explosion either. I guess it's just one of those Irish mysteries."

"Oh, okay." *Good. Come to think of it, why doesn't Nita just ask her Aunt about the spell? Actually, has she ever said anything about knowing she's a wizard? But she must, they're family. But I suppose she would have to be sure a non-wizard wasn't around, and there's always people coming and going around here.*

The girls took the bus to the address her book said the castle was to be found, and Susan asked about something she had been wondering about.

"You were quite truthful back there," she remarked. "You don't happen to have *Compulsive Honesty* do you?"

"You mean could I lie if I needed to? Sure. Before I told my parents I was a wizard I had to sneak out and do things on the sly. Why?"

"Wait, your parents aren't wizards? Huh, another blow for the Slytherin 'pure blood' agenda."

"It just worked out that way. For whatever reason my father didn't have what the Powers needed, and so he wasn't offered wizardry."

"Weird. Anyway, I just wondered. It's the *Paragon* in me, trying to work out people's *Backgrounds* and *Weaknesses*. I just thought, if you did, and there came a time we needed to, say, stretch the truth, that I should do the talking."

"Are you sure it isn't just your *Curious*," asked Sparkle softly from the seat beside them. Of course, normally a cat wouldn't be allowed on a bus, but a cat with human level intelligence didn't let a little thing like that stop her. "Making you want to poke your nose into everything?"

"Could be, that one hasn't come up in a while..."

"That won't be necessary," continued Nita. "It's just not a good habit to get into, when you're a wizard. The easier time you have of lying, the more chance it might get into a spell. And in wizardry, what you put into the spell becomes real. So you have to watch it."

"Got it."

"That would be an interesting spell, actually. You cast it on a person and get a look at their character sheet."

"What Planet would that fall under?"

"Good question."

Having arrived, the girls walked up to the enormous castle, and Susan looked around interestedly. "Yup, it's a castle all right." Stone walls, somewhat overgrown with vines, towered over them. "Ah, there's a door!"

"Wait, are we just going to knock?" asked Nita nervously.

"Why not?" asked Susan.

"Hello," Sparkle said to a cat looking at them from underneath a nearby bush. It hissed and ran off. "How rude."

The three made their way to the door and Susan used the heavy iron knocker to announce her presence. They waited.

"Maybe no one's home?" suggested Nita.

Susan, having rolled only an eight on *Spirit Sense* couldn't say one way or the other. There was a lot of life around there, and *Ley Lines* aplenty to mess up her senses. "Then I guess we-" she started to say when the door opened a crack.

A man in a suit stared down at them.

"Yes?" he enquired.

"Is the master of the castle in?" asked Susan. "We must speak to him about a most urgent matter."

"Are you expected?" asked the man.

“Ah, probably not, but you never know, right?”

The man didn't so much as think about cracking a smile. “And who shall I say is calling, and what shall I say it's about?”

“Just give him this,” said Nita, handing the rolled up pieces of paper that held the spell the three had made. “And tell him Nita Callahan needs his help with it.”

“Very well,” he said, taking it. However, he didn't disappear inside but rather stood looking it over. “Is this some sort of joke?”

The pages were written in the *Speech*, the local equivalent to Susan's magical symbology that she envisioned when doing her magic. Not any kind of human language, the writing would have just resembled scribblings to anyone not also a wizard.

“He'll understand, believe me,” she answered.

“Wait here,” said the man, closing the door on them again.

“I guess everyone is a little rude around here,” remarked Sparkle.

“They probably get people wanting tours of the castle or something all the time,” suggested Nita. “But I didn't expect a butler.”

“Hey, if you've got money enough to buy a whole castle in Ireland, you can afford a manservant or two. Wonder if there'll be maids?”

“Didn't you get enough of maids back with Louise?”

“Like one can ever get enough maids.”

The three waited, Susan bouncing around on her heels or wondering if anyone would see her if she flew up to the top of the castle and had a look around.

“Give them a few minutes,” said Nita when she raised her hand to grab the knocker again. “Look at the size of this place. It probably takes them two minutes just to go from one end to the other.”

*Wonder if she has Timekeeper?*

Moments later, the door opened again and a rather short man was standing there, holding the papers with the spell on it. He had a somewhat fine mustache, but it might really be something when it grew up, and he had a serious look about him. He looked evenly at the two, then to the sides and behind them. “Where are the rest of you?” he asked, “and why did they send such young people to deliver this? What's going on, what's this all about?” He shook the paper at them.

“Perhaps if we could explain...” started Nita.

“Oh, of course, where are my manners? Shaun O'Driscoll, Senior for Europe.” He threw the door open and stuck out his hand. “But I suppose you already knew that.”

“Susan Felton, dimensional traveler,” said Susan, shaking it.

“That's nice,” said Shaun, reaching for Nita.

“I'm Nita Callahan, from New York.”

“Nice to-” he looked back at Susan, freezing in mid-shake. “What did you say?”

“Dimensional traveler. Look, can we come inside? This is going to take a little while.”

He looked down at the spell again. “I guess you better. I'll have Niall make some tea.” He threw the door open and was only slightly surprised to see Sparkle following them in.

“She's with me,” Susan explained.

“Ah, right. I guess some cream as well.”

“Actually, as with most cats my age, I'm lactose intolerant,” said Sparkle, looking up at him. “But if you happen to have some tuna water, that would be just lovely.”

“I'll... see what I can do?”

“Appreciate it.”

“I think they both enjoy it,” Nita muttered to herself. “Shocking people, that is.”

No Help There

Time: Half an hour later

Place: Sitting room inside Castle Matrix

“And that’s the whole story!” concluded Susan, telling her story (again). “Which brings us to now. We tried to wake the cup up, but we must have done something wrong. But given the three of us were about as good in wizardry as any three people can be, I can’t imagine what.”

“So right now the museum no doubt believes the cup has been stolen somehow, out of a locked case?”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” said Susan, not sounding very sorry at all. “I have a *Creation* spell but it can’t make gold for some bizarre reason. So I couldn’t make a replacement. Plus I would have had to cast the spell multiple times, once for each gemstone... Then try to glue them in place, it would have been a huge hassle.”

“We thought it better to start work right away,” Nita put in. “As long as we return the cup back where it belongs when we’re done, everything will be fine, right?”

“For certain values of fine,” Shaun replied, rubbing his eyes. “So you found a Power, and she’s making a spear. You found the cup, and tried to wake it up yourselves. You did this because she told you about a reenactment that’s going to have to be performed soon, which will stop people going sideways like they’ve been doing.”

“That’s about right,” agreed Susan.

“She said the sword was there too, but I think it’s too far gone,” said Nita.

“Pity, we’ll need all four treasures if it’s the event I’m thinking about. Still, I’m glad you brought it to my attention, even though I’ve been handling reports for a week now about this very thing and was going to call a meeting soon to get everyone’s opinion on what we should be doing about it. If you can just hand the cup over, you can consider your part in this finished.”

“Uh, did you not hear my story?” asked Susan, looking between him and Sparkle. “Whatever you think this event is, forget it. The Darkness is here someplace, I have that on good authority. If I don’t help you stop it, the energy of your reality is going to become a meal for him.”

“Yes, we’ll keep that in mind when I meet with everyone. Now, the cup, please, I’m a busy man.”

Susan wondered if this guy was a bit dense, or just plain evil, and did a *Dimension Sense* on him, getting a 4, her minimum. *Great*. Sparkle also tried, getting a little better, a six. *Never thought I would need INSight for skill checks, otherwise I might have made that a little better. I have to get that skill raised! It is average though, and two above my STRength. Stupid poor rolls!* She looked to Nita, who nodded, and Susan shrugged. *I guess she knows best.*

She pulled the cup from her sub-space pocket and held it up for the man to see.

“Yes, that’s the one. I’ll just-”

As he reached for it, the cup suddenly blazed up, and Susan’s *Spirit Sense* went wild. Bright light lit the room, causing everyone to look away, and Susan felt the cup go red hot in her hands, burning them. She cried out.

“Put it back again! Put it back again!” Shaun was shouting at her.

She tried, but found her fingers wouldn’t obey her commands for some reason and realized she was at a significant penalty to MANipulation at the moment. Making a tremendous effort (i.e. she put ten energy into it) she got a 17, enough to basically tear the pocket open and drop the cup inside.

Everyone in the room blinked afterimages away, Susan trying to get a good look at her hands in the process.

“Well, crap,” she finally said, as she got a good look. Her hands were badly burned, the skin charred and even bone showing through.

“Oh my God, your hands!” said Nita.

“Yeah, no wonder I was at such a high penalty.” She giggled.

“Are you okay?”

“Can’t even feel it!” she chirped.

*Huh, she should be at pain penalties regardless, thought Sparkle. There’s nothing in the rules about burn damage short circuiting the pain response, even though with burns that bad, it would happen to non-Paragons. Not even under the “Catching on Fire” section, where you think it would be. And she has Low Pain Tolerance too.*

“Shock,” said Shaun, coming over to look at them. “And the damage probably burnt out her nerves. That’s going to take some time to fix, even with wizardry, I’m afraid. I’m sorry, your use of them may never recover.”

“Oh, never mind that.” She held her leg out to Nita. “If you would be so kind?”

“Will that work?” Nita asked, trying not to look at those ruined hands as she slid Susan’s pant leg up and grabbed the knife out.

“Of course, silly!”

“Wait, what are you-” Shaun didn’t get much further as Nita drove the knife (with possibly a bit more force than was strictly required) through Susan’s right hand. Both healed immediately and Susan flexed them.

“That’s better, thanks,” she said, as Nita drew the knife out.

“Do you need *Regeneration*?” asked Sparkle.

“Nah, 2d10 healing? It did a twelve, I could tell that much. That would be enough to nearly blow off my whole arm. I couldn’t exactly check to see what my *character sheet* said about the damage, but it must have been less than that. It’s fine. Thanks.” She took the knife back from Nita and strapped it to her leg again. “Okay, heavy gloves when we take it out next time. Wonder if that will give me a penalty to MANipulation?”

“Your hands!” exclaimed Shaun, looking them over. “Not a mark on them. How?”

“Ain’t magic grand? Now, where should we put that cup so it doesn’t burn through whatever it’s sitting on? I honestly didn’t expect it to blaze up light that. For one thing it’s the symbol of *water* isn’t it?”

“Yes, it’s the spirit of water, I’m at somewhat of a loss myself.” His eyes kept darting to her hands, as if he couldn’t believe what he had been seeing.

“I’m not,” grumped Nita. “In fact I know exactly what happened. I should have realized when I couldn’t reach my sister. We were in your *Dimension*, not here. There’s no connection to the waters of Ireland in your *Personal Dimension*.”

“Oh course!” exclaimed Susan, snapping her newly regenerated fingers. “You’re right. So when we took it out, the soul suddenly came back to it, because the spell we wrote did actually work. That caused the physical changes we saw and made it get really hot. That would explain it.”

“Wait, you girls actually succeeded and didn’t realize it? Who are you two? Where exactly were you at the time?”

“Dude, I just spent the last half an hour explaining that. Do people say ‘dude’ here?”

“Not typically, I think,” answered Susan.

“Look, I don’t think that will happen again. But let me put some bindings somewhere and we can bring it out again. Oh, and the reaction was greater here because the water table under the castle is fairly high. Anywhere else and it probably would have been more gradual. Wait here.”

He got up and left the room, leaving the three to sit down again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asked Nita with concern.

“Never better. That spell doesn’t bring back energy, but I’m totally refreshed again, don’t worry.”

“If you say so. I guess this means we can go wake up the rock, huh?”

“Yeah, it should work. Though I would have to use *Augment Skill* again, to read the spell. I only have a three otherwise, that’s below average. I wouldn’t want to mess it up.”

“There should be plenty of wizards around here anyway, they can probably take care of it.”

“True. We should be out looking for the vessel of air. I bet my *Question* spell could help. We can’t use *Descry Object* because we don’t know exactly what we’re looking for. But I

could ask the world 'where should we look for a vessel to house the spirit of air,' and I bet we would get a place name, at least. That's only one or two words."

"Whatever you think is best."

*Now there's a phrase that's music to my ears.*

Moments later Shaun came back and led them through the house, to a "small" closet he had a table set up.

"Okay, I've put a spell on the room, it should hold. Plunk it down on the table there."

"Sure thing."

She did so, and this time the cup behaved, merrily throwing a light show like sunlight reflecting off water about the room.

"Pretty!" said Susan, looking around.

"Yeah, that's awake," he remarked. "Well done, girls. You don't mind if I keep this spell, look it over more carefully?"

"Not at all," said Nita. "I hope it can help with the spirit of earth."

"If it did this good a job on the cup, I'm sure it'll suffice. I'll show you back to the door, you two can head home now."

"Head home?" asked Susan. "I wish. I need to find The Darkness before I can move on."

"Right, right, we'll keep an eye out for that too."

"But we want to help!" protested Nita. "I mainly wrote that spell, Susan and Sparkle just helped. Okay, I was augmented with her magic at the time, but still. I think that shows what I'm capable of."

"Oh, no doubt. Magic, of course! Yes, when we need you, we'll be in touch. You're in the book, right? Yes, not to worry. Here's the door. Good bye now!"

The door slammed behind them.

"Now what was all that about?" asked Sparkle, smoothing her fur out and checking to make sure she still had a whole tail.

"I think I rather unnerved that gentleman," said Susan. "I can't imagine how."

"Maybe he just didn't know how to deal with a magic user?" wondered Nita, looking back up at the castle. "Because he must deal with all kinds of different wizards all the time."

"I don't know, I almost got the sense he didn't really believe me."

"Your story is kind of unbelievable. I mean, I had no choice because you were right there in the other world I went into by accident. And what you've said and done fits. But he can't see you're telling the truth."

"I suppose. But in that case, giving me the means to show I'm legit, or at least the benefit of the doubt would have been better than just tossing me out."

"You did say we would have to go this alone."

"True. And I know where the cup is, he won't dare move it until the time of the 'play' that Bidy was talking about. I can take it back easily enough if I need to."

"You don't think we should do the reenactment ourselves, do you?"

"Why not? It's not going to be a standard one anyway, remember? We can bring the so called treasures along, but I'll rely on my own power to put this to rights, thank you very much."

"Remember, you're supposed to be helping these people solve their own problems, not solving it for them," cautioned Sparkle. "You deal with the additional element, they deal with the original situation."

"Yeah, I hear you. Come on, I still have energy left, let's look for the air vessel."

So the trio went into the surrounding forest where they figured they wouldn't be disturbed, and Susan tried her *Question* magic. She wasn't expecting the answer she got though.

*Unknown*

“What does that mean?” asked Nita.

“Good question,” replied Susan. “Could someone have moved the vessel to one of these side worlds?”

“Someone from the other side, you mean? The Lone Power?”

“Seems if he’s here, now, like in that hunt, he would want to help see himself win. No better way to do that than to keep what we need from us. Hiding a vessel seems an easy thing to do.”

“That’s how you beat Him so easily!” Nita suddenly exclaimed, jumping up from the log she was sitting on. She laughed and stomped her feet, as if some tension was going out of her. “I should have guessed before.”

“Now what are you going on about?”

“That thing you fought. It wasn’t Him, that was a small reenactment! Must have been. That’s why He faded out at the end, rather than just blowing you away. He didn’t have the power He normally would, as that ‘recording’ of Him normally just rode around on that horse after that elk creature. When the recording couldn’t beat you, it just sort of fizzled out. Like a... cassette tape being cut. That makes so much sense now.”

*Oh man, cassette tapes. If these people even knew what was coming to replace them!*  
“I’m happy you think so. The vessel?”

“Oh, right. Gee, I don’t know, is there another question we can ask your magic to find out?”

“Why not just ask that directly? It’s a yes or no question.”

So she did.

Yes

“Ah hah! So it was here and it’s been moved.”

“We’ll never find it!” despaired Nita.

“Maybe. Let me keep asking.” She asked “What is the first step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

*Defeat drow in two days*

“What is the second step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

*Impress the Sidhe*

“What is the third step in retrieving the vessel of air back to our world?”

*There is no step three*

“Nice,” said Sparkle, nodding. “A good fight is always a quick way to get XP.”

“And I still have a bunch of *Materia* to convert, and spells to learn. Seems like the vessel is in the bag, if all we have to do is beat up some drow, whatever they are on this world. And hopefully that will impress these Sidhe, whatever they are. But what to do in the meantime?”

“Fire?”

“I don’t know, burning the town down might be a little extreme just because I might get bored...”

“I mean the vessel!”

“Oh, why didn’t you say? Yeah, let’s ask about that!” So Susan asked “What is the first step in retrieving the vessel of fire back to our world?” figuring that worked the last time.

*Reforge it*

“Ah. Time to talk to Bidy again!”

And so the group made their way back to the farmhouse, where Bidy was still pounding away, seeming to have made several practice spears in the meantime.

“You three again?” she said, tossing her hammer down in disgust. “I’ve already told you-”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s old news!” Susan verbally ran over her, waving that away with a hand. “We woke up the cup, the spell is in the hands of those that can wake up the stone, and the vessel of air should be in hand within three days. All that’s left is fire, and that’s your department.”

“Wait, you did all that just today?”

“I admit, technicality Nita is on vacation so I’ve been taking it easy for her sake. But yes, we have.”

“Oh, you have not,” said Nita, rolling her eyes.

“Shows what you know. Well?”

“Look, I can’t just... deal with you,” she said.

“Why not? We took care of our end, and it seems like you’re about ready to take care of yours.”

“What, these? These will never do. They would be ripped apart in an instant if the soul of fire were to be placed in them.”

“So let me at one, and I’ll make it unbreakable. I’ve done it before, and with *Energetic Accumulation* and *Augment Skill: Fabrication* I bet I could do it in an hour or so. I would be wiped out the rest of the day, but I could do it.”

“I don’t know what any of that means. The point is, there’s just no way. You need to get me metal that doesn’t exist anymore in this universe, and you need to raise an army for the reenactment.”

“My magic makes me an army,” Susan said coldly, staring Bidy in the face.

She shook her head. “Believe me, no matter how powerful you think you are, it won’t be enough. You can’t use the spear, only one person on Earth can do that now, and you still have to find him or her. I’ll do what’s required, you don’t have to worry about that. But you need to bring me the answers, not the other way around.”

Susan glared at her. “Even though, if we get it wrong, everything you built here turns to ashes.”

She sighed sadly. “Even so.”

“Great. What a fantastic system. Fine. If you change your mind, maybe want to help us instead of just standing around, you know where to find us. We are capable, you know, what we did today should prove that.”

“That isn’t the issue. I am surprised, and I certainly believe you are what you say you are. But even I have to follow the rules.”

Susan snorted. “Rules are...” She froze. Was that the voice of The Darkness in the back of her mind, saying “Rules are for the weak” along with her, or just her own fears?

“Never mind. Come on, Nita, it’s a long ride back to the house.”

“So now what?” Nita asked as the two sat side by side on the bus back to the farm.

Susan shook her head sadly. “I really don’t know. Wait until the day after tomorrow, I guess. The one other wizard I’ve met here seemed to just want to get rid of me rather than allow me to help.”

“See it from his point of view,” pointed out Sparkle. “You show up at his door, telling some wild story, then pull the cup out of nowhere? A cup which then flares to life, showing him no matter what else you might be, that you’re powerful. But it’s a power he doesn’t understand, it doesn’t fit into his worldview. A couple of kids, in his mind, shouldn’t have been able to pull off the theft of the cup and put the soul of water back into it. Not with the wizardry he knows, especially given how reluctant Nita here is to use it around here. He’s confused, but he sees the knife, usually which causes wounds, heal your hands, now he’s a little afraid. You don’t make it any easier with your attitudes.”

Susan thought a moment. "Maybe my *Poor Sense* weakness shouldn't refer to my hearing." She grinned and winked.

"Har har."

"I get what you're saying though. Man, guess I'm my own worst enemy. Maybe it switched over since Severus isn't trying to kill me anymore. I figured it would be The Darkness, but..."

"How do you know it isn't? Has it spoken to you lately?"

"No, not much, now that I think about it."

"That's the way to tell, I think. When it's talking, it's not able to influence you. When it can, it doesn't need to taunt you, so why bother. You're already going along with what it wants."

Susan took a deep breath. "You could be right, and that does fit, I guess. I wonder if losing Luna was a worse blow than I thought? It's been proven I can't rely on my own judgment sometimes... Can I rely on you to take her place? You don't speak up about the stuff she did. And asking people I meet along the way? That just seems unfair because they aren't used to my wacky nature. Or what plans I might come up with, that seem insane on the surface but are actually reasonable for me. I can't have outsiders second guessing me every second. No offense, Nita."

"None taken."

"I'm just your *Companion*, not my place to do that. But... I'll try."

"Thanks."

*It seems I still have a long way to go.*

Prepare for battle

Time- The next day, early morning

Place- Nita's trailer

"Nita," said Sparkle the next morning after breakfast, "I have a request." The two girls were leaning on a fence, watching the goings on around the farm, and Sparkle had looked around to make sure no one was nearby to hear her talking.

"What can I do for you?" she replied.

"Can your book tell us what we should expect from this 'reenactment' that's going to take place soon?"

"Hey, good call." Susan's eyes lit up. "We should probably put some spells together now, while we have the chance. No sense just standing around, we have a whole day until we get the vessel for the air spirit. Let's get to work."

"As it's happened many times, I'm sure there are some reports of what other wizards have gone through. Might as well take a look." Nita concentrated, glanced around, then said a word, making her book of wizardry drop into her hand. She sat down by the fence and started paging through it, and Susan got a curious look on her face.

"Actually, I might take a look myself. It's written down, obviously." Nita looked up at her, but she had already started casting *Research*, and five minutes later, her conjured mystical book appeared.

Between the two of them, and Nita was quite impressed with her *Research* spell, they learned the shape of Balor was one of a grotesque, misshapen human with an eye that could launch energy attacks (as Susan put it) against whatever got in front of him. He wasn't great on turning, apparently, his bulk was mostly fat, and it originally took several creatures with metal instruments to even raise his eyelid to begin the attack.

*So as soon as you see him, open a Teleportal and lead everyone behind him. That should neutralize his only weapon in that form. Odd that The Darkness would choose something like that to inhabit, but then again, it's probably the first thing it found available that suited his needs. It doesn't want to hang around these other realities any more than I do, probably. But before it's been something impressive, like that dragon. Guess it has to take what it can get.*

As well as the main threat of Balor himself, he commanded an army of creatures that would be throwing themselves at the group when they arrived in the parallel world these troubles were coming from.

"So a couple of casting of *Magical Ally: Major* to start, can't have too many of them running around when there's an army baring down on, right, Sparkle?"

She nodded. "True, with *Spell Symbol* there's nothing that says you can't have a dozen of them active at a time. They're just a spell. I wonder though." She put a paw out and her character sheet appeared on the ground. "I have enough XP, barely, for an *Imbuing*. I wonder if making a permanent *Elemental Line* would be worth it?"

"Nineteen XP," mused Susan. "That's a lot of spells, or... flip it over, will you? Yeah, threes, just like me. You could raise that skill group of the new skills, and have some left over for a new spell or two."

"But keep in mind, my energy isn't nearly as high as yours. I can't do more than thirty spells or so at once, and in a combat type situation like this one, it's a major concern."

"I agree, that's why I'm sticking with my sword lately. Plus my mass take down spells haven't been as useful lately. Like those wolves were right on us. Though I have to admit, I wanted to see how well *Slash All* would work out."

"You used to use *Hypnotic Field* all the time, too. It was your signature move, almost."

"Yeah, because I didn't want things dead at the time. I suppose I could still use it, but damaging someone knocks them out of it, and with my *Slash All* going that would be pointless to zone them out only to wake them up again."

"We need a spell to store up energy over time. Like stuff some into a crystal or something, that we can pull out later."

Susan laughed. "That would be so cheesy! Man, a month or two and I would have hundreds of energy to play with. I don't need any help becoming more dangerous you know. Still, you do come up with nice ideas." Her eyes sparkled with possibility.

"So back to my quandary here."

She shook herself. "Right. Up to you, but there are some things to consider."

"What's that?"

"You're going to be in a war zone, and that means armoring you up as well as I'm armored."

"True." She shivered. "I'm a minus three, something hits me and it's goodbye companion."

"So let's keep that from happening. You'll be *Accelerated* of course, but I'm going to make you your own *Symbol* with *Avatar of War* on it. And as a bonus you can be a minus two!"

Sparkle considered. "I can actually *Shape-shift* up two sizes, so that would get me up to human size. Throw *Avatar* on top of that, and my claws are considered weapons, that could actually work."

"Yeah. Plus with the *STR*ength bonus from the spell you could do some decent damage just swatting things with your claws plus fire."

"I do have combat skills. Not at a very high rating of course, but enough to hunt with as a cat. No sense not having *Augment Skill* going as well, I guess."

"Yeah! In fact..." She looked Sparkle's collar over, removing it from around her neck. It presently had only a small tag that held her *Ally Spell Symbol*. "We could get a few more of these tags, heck I could make some in a pinch. And I have another idea. Wait here." She ran over to the trailer and looked around, finding what she wanted and heading back. She had a piece of paper and some scissors in hand, and cut a small strip of paper. "Imagine the *Spell Symbol* going in the center here, then we just fold it over like this, and wrap it around the collar like this. A dab of glue, and it'll stay, and you can fire off a bunch of symbols when you need to. Just make the trigger word end in a number, like 'line 1' and 'line 2' and remember which number you're on. You could have a dozen or more wrapped around here."

"That's almost as good as what I wanted, isn't it?"

"Sure thing. Now, it still isn't an unlimited number, but it only takes a couple of spells to pull off, rather than using up XP that's better spent elsewhere."

"If my *Photographic Memory* serves, and it does, the spell description doesn't list any actual size the *Symbol* has to be, right? So really it could be even smaller than this paper."

"I guess. What were you thinking of using?"

"Pins. Put the symbol on the head of a pin."

"Huh. Hard to tell which you used up in that case. I suppose if you always started using them from the center where the tag is--"

"No, no, I'm talking about you using something like that. Make a bunch of pins, then just stick them to your pant leg. You can make them all the same trigger, just grab one, expend it, toss it, grab the next one."

"I could probably do that in a single action. Maybe grab with the left, 'off hand' action with the right, if I made them *Elemental Blast*. Yeah, that could work. I'm glad I came with you!"

Sparkle snorted. "We have the day, I suggest we get started. Pull Nita's energy, and find some *Ley Lines* to hook into, if there's some we can use and be undisturbed. Make all the stuff you can, wait while your energy comes back, and repeat. Your father's staff could actually drain energy out of *Ley Lines* and recharge him. We don't have that luxury so we'll just have to make do."

"There's one thing we do have around here, though. Animals. I bet I could swipe ten or fifteen energy from each horse and such when no one is looking. And they can't tell on me."

Sparkle nodded. "Good idea. It's for a good cause, so I'll allow it. The better we prepare now, the less danger we'll be in later."

"Not to worry, I'll be sure and write myself a note to save before we leave." She chuckled. "We really will be pulling out all the stops huh?"

“Saving, yeah. That would really come in handy if things go badly. What else can we think of that might help?”

“I have a bunch of *Avatar Papers* made, I can make some more. Others will be coming, after all, and the more armored we are, the better I’ll- Wait, my pant leg becomes armor, that might not work for your pin idea.”

“Your bracelet is incorporated, right? Why would the pins work any differently?”

“I guess you’re right. Huh, I could stick them straight in, they might hold just enough when I’m armored that I can grab them, but not knock them out when I’m swinging my sword around. I’ll see, but I do think something small, easily grabbed, would work best.”

“Let’s have the book, see there’s something really useful I should learn in the meantime. And I can make you some *Elemental Line* if you want them.”

“Better to have it all. I’ll want *Acceleration* as well. Let’s go in fully buffed, but not under any penalties.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

And so the group went to go find a good spot to work, and Susan made her *Spirit Sense* checks to find some *Ley Lines*. She then got a twenty one on her LUCk check to see how far away the nearest ones were, and then a twelve to see how many there were. “Score!” she said, moving off. Sparkle did a *Spirit Sense*, getting an eight, which was enough to tell there was a bunch of energy in the area, at least. Susan got an eleven.

“This is perfect!” chortled Susan, rubbing her hands together.

“Uh, what makes this spot any better than another?” asked Nita, looking around confused.

“Energy, by dear, energy. For one thing, this is a farm so there’s lot of life around here. That means lots of *Ley Lines*, in other words, spiritual conduits for the life energy of the planet. Right here there’s a bunch of them, so we can sit here and get some nice benefits from hooking into them. For example, let’s say I spend six energy on whatever it is I’m doing while connected to the *line*. I can then put six free energy into that, which comes from the *Line* itself. Then I roll my *Energy Boost* skill (best skill ever) and get back up to half, in other words three. So I’ve spent a total of three energy to make a *Spell Paper* but I’ve gotten an effective eleven boost to my rating, making it at least a fifteen, if not more. The other one energy goes into casting the spell, in case you were keeping count? Anyway, that’s why we were looking around, and what we’ve been talking about.”

“Do you think you could teach me to sense and hook into this energy?” Nita asked, trying to hide her excitement.

“Don’t know. I had to take a special background, *Spirit Mage*, in order to do it. But non-*Paragon* people don’t even have *Backgrounds* that I can tell. I mean you must, but you didn’t spend points for them or anything. So I have no idea how you guys balance out. Even with these *Lines* and taking your energy and the animal’s, I’m going to be wiped out by lunch time. At that point I’ll talk you through what I think someone who is not a *Paragon* would do and see if you can feel anything. I mean I just make checks in the skill, but that still sort of means something outside being who I am. It’s tough to explain.”

*To someone who isn’t genre savvy...* finished Sparkle silently.

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

And so the two started work. Susan changed her charm bracelet to include these spells:

Acceleration

Flight

Magical Ally: Major

Augment Skill: Sword

Augment Stat: STR

She had Nita scrounge up some suitably flat pieces of metal which she attached to Sparkle’s collar, giving her *Acceleration* and *Avatar of War* in addition to her normal *Ally*:

*Major*. Also some glue, to stick the new *Spell Papers* onto Sparkle's collar. She then worked with her to make some *Spell Papers* with *Elemental Line* for her and *Elemental Blast* for herself. When Sparkle was out of energy she started looking through the book for something to learn as Susan continued working.

"Hey, remember that green haired lady in Louise's world?" she asked, looking up from the book when Susan was between castings.

"She worked for the principal but turned out to be a thief?"

"Right. Well, you remember her 'weapon' right? That huge construct made of stone?"

"Yeah, that thing was annoying."

"It's in here."

"What?" Susan scrambled over to look at the book. "That must be one of the ones... uh, that guy gave us." She looked over at Nita, not sure if Silverstreak wanted his identity branded about. "*Colossus*, huh? Grade ten, hardly worth it for the use you would get out of it. Very specific circumstances it can be used under, I mean you would have to be outside, and have a lot of space for it to maneuver."

"Which is exactly what we'll have, right? And an opponent that's huge for it to fight, to boot. Perfect in this situation."

"True. We would lose our own actions to control it, you want it?"

"Probably best. You'll be swinging that blade around when we get close to him, keeping his forces off us. Yeah, see if you can--"

"Wait a second, I just had a thought!"

"What's that?"

"Why only use one? My *Materia* is all in my armor slots, rather than my weapon slots, at the moment. That would make it apply to any weapon I held. I have two swords, and two hands. I'll have *Augment Skill* going so the off hand penalty will be laughable. And I can make up an *Augment Skill* of *Off Hand* so my delay for that drops, so why not use both? Imagine two attacks, against all opponents in range, with my augmented STrength and fire damage factored in... for a total of three delay." She was almost drooling.

"You'd have to drop one to cast a spell."

"Eh, that's a free action. Don't plan on doing much of that anyway. Especially not with all the long range damage I'll be doing with two blades, both on fire. Plus if I do, my one sword will come back to me just by holding my hand out, I don't even have to bend over to pick it up."

"What about all those pins you're making?"

"I'll give them to Nita! Hey Nita, you want to shoot streams of fire out of your hands... with magic?"

"Do I?" she answered with a grin.

"Problem solved."

They all laughed. "As I was saying, see if you can understand this and make me one."

"You got it."

Susan looked the spell over, getting a nineteen on *Magic Theory* and a twenty two on *Magic Scripture*, both more than enough to understand the difficulty fifteen spell. Twenty minutes later Susan wrapped another paper around Sparkle's collar, this one with the spell of *Colossus* in it.

A bit later, Susan relaxed, leaning back on her elbows in the grass. She kept giggling, imagining having all her spell bracelet spells going at once, with no penalty, and wading across the battlefield, swords slashing up everything.

"Did doing that much magic break her brain?" asked Nita to Sparkle, somewhat concerned.

"I suppose it's possible," she admitted.

"Oh, come on, you're just as excited as I am to see what our magic can *really* do. Don't tell me the prospect of being a lion sized creature of fire and death isn't appealing. We can go all out- because whatever we're fighting doesn't actually exist! We won't be killing anything real, it's just a recording that we have to put down. We'll have several lions, dragons, my

twenty five *Legion soldiers*, and when it comes to the boss, a huge construct made of stone rips out of the earth and starts pounding it. Can't you just see it now?" She stared dreamily off into space. "The Darkness isn't going to know what hit it in this world."

"Just don't get too used to it. You start to like it too much, and maybe the next time we face something alive you might want to take this same approach."

"Oh, don't worry. It's just because we have this time to prepare we can do this at all. Normally it would be whatever spells we knew and being clever. This situation just requires us to smash through to the boss as quickly as possible, take him out, and keep everyone that comes with us safe in the process."

"And here I was thinking we were going with them, not the other way around."

"You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Fine, we keep everyone we go with safe. Happy?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Now, I haven't used all my *energy*, I need some to cast my draining spell on the animals later. So let me put on *Augment Skill: Teaching* and I can see what I can teach you. After all, Louise and her friends learned *Magic Sense*, I can probably at least teach you that, and give you the basics for *Imbuing* and *Fabrication*, as they're also quasi-magic skills and you should be able to pick them up. Then we can try the more advanced stuff."

"Anything you can show me would be great. Imagine, skills from other realities! Now I'm getting excited!"

So Susan made some *Teaching* checks and told Nita about other things she could do that weren't strictly her magic, then the girls went to get lunch. Afterwards Susan drained the farm animals she could, then headed back to the secluded spot and once again burned through her energy making *Spell Symbol* stuff. She had several *Magical Ally: Major* that Nita could activate, along with extra copies of *Avatar*, *Acceleration*, and anything else Nita thought might be handy in their upcoming fight. They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to get Nita to sense energy, magic, and even gave her some instruction in *Ninjutsu*.

"Don't let my sister near *Ninjutsu* though," she said, practicing a move. "We both took Ju-Jitsu lessons, and she really picked it up fast. A ninja wizard." She shuddered. "The world wouldn't survive."

Susan also explained what she thought *Energy Boost* was about, so she could teach that skill, and Nita made sure to copy all this information down into her wizard manual for later review.

Susan went to bed that night feeling a real sense of accomplishment. She felt she couldn't be more ready to attack The Darkness this time, and even had a couple more days, in case she thought of something else she wanted to add.

*And all thanks to Spell Symbol. Best... Spell... Ever.*

The next day Susan, Nita, and Annie were sitting around the table, eating breakfast. The paper was open beside her, and while Susan didn't care much for local goings on, the headline caught her eye. She flipped it open, and skimmed the paper over, finding many stories with a similar theme inside. It seemed the problems in this area were getting worse, as everything from dinosaurs to ghosts, ancient heroes and villains, were being seen in the area. The paper dismissed them all, and Susan was out and out laughing by the time she got to the sixth story that the writers just reported on, and then called the person who got his sheep stolen by some figure from Irish folklore an attention seeker.

"Look at all this," she said, passing the paper to Nita. "Honestly, wizards around here take a very lax attitude to things, let me tell you. Where I'm from, those in charge of making sure knowledge of magic doesn't get out to the general populous would be running themselves ragged doing memory charms to people. What's wrong with you?"

Nita had been glancing at her aunt in terror and trying to get Susan to stop by making a slashing motion across her neck where she hoped her aunt couldn't see. "Wizards?" she asked, trying to fake a laugh. "What are you talking about?"

Susan looked between the two, and Annie had a weird expression on her face as well. "What is the matter with you two? No one else is around, it's fine."

"Did, uh, did you say something about Wizards?" Annie asked.

"Yeah, wizards. You know, that weird *speech* stuff, describing things? Seems useless around here?" A mental light bulb went off above her head. "Oh, come on. Please tell me this situation isn't what I think it is."

The other two looked at each other for a moment, then blurted out "You're a wizard?"

Susan banged her head on the table several times, then stayed there with her arms over her head. "It is. It's exactly what I thought. Ow. What is wrong with you people?"

"You really are one?" asked Annie.

"You too?" replied Nita.

Both women seemed to be seeing the other for the first time, and actually got up to hug, like they had just reunited after many years.

"I can't believe this!" gushed Annie. "You got picked, that's great!"

"Dairine too, little snot read the oath out of my book and got a computer version of the manual the next day! I had no idea you were though!" She smacked her head. "And Tom even said something like that to my dad, that it was his side of the family. I completely forgot until just now!"

"Wow, it's great to know there are more wizards in the family. Wait, Tom? Isn't he an advisor from your area?"

"Yeah, oh, right, I told them. Had to, really. They took it... well, oddly, but at least they accept it."

"He better have. Man, am I going to have to have words with him next time I see him. Two wizard kids, how does he cope?"

"Hey, we aren't that bad. Even if the computer does follow my sister around while she does her chores."

"And you!" said Annie, finally looking at Susan again. "How did you know?"

"Uh, I could feel it with *Magic Sense*?" she replied, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I knew right away, having checked everyone out when I first arrived here. I couldn't be sure The Darkness wasn't hiding out here, so I made sure everyone here was who they claimed to be. I guess you wizards really don't have a skill like that, huh?"

"Don't mind her, she talks like that most of the time," said Nita.

"So you're a wizard too?"

"Not exactly. I do magic, not wizardry. I *could* do your kind, but I would need to take Nita's book to do it, and I'm not great at *Adaptive Skill* yet. So it's better if I stick to what I know."

Anne's eyes narrowed. "You're the funny girl that brought Johnny the cup," she accused. "And I thought his description of the other girl sounded familiar. It was you!"  
"Funny girl? I hardly did a single joke when I was there! Did you hear the one about the vampire that goes to the bar? It's a monster only bar but he's leading a human on a chain by the neck. The bartender says to him 'we don't serve his kind here' and the vampire says 'I know, that's why I brought my own.' and sinks his fangs into the guy." Both stared at her. "What? That is comedy gold right there, people."

There was silence for a moment.

"Maybe it's your timing," said Sparkle, licking a paw and beginning to wash her face. This time both burst laughing.

"Hey!"

"Seriously, what's going on with you two?" asked Annie. "And how did you wake the cup up so easily?"

"Forget that," said Susan. "How come you two didn't know the other was a wizard? I mean you're family. Wizardry here isn't all as secretive as you made it out to be, Nita, because no one could read that paper and not think 'hey, magic would explain all those things. Maybe there is magic in the world.' I mean how much bizarre stuff can a town accept and not start asking for better answers?"

"You would be surprised," answered Annie, sitting down again. "Okay, so from the top, who are you, and why can that cat talk?"

"What's wrong with talking cats?" asked the kitten that walked in. "You have something against talking cats? We should be seen and not heard? I do poetry you know."

"I'm sure it's wonderful stuff too."

"Hi Tualha," said Nita to the cat. "Annie, have you met Tualha?"

"We've met, and I have nothing against talking cats, I just don't see that many. Tualha is a bard, that's why she can talk. I wondered if your cat was something similar?"

"How do you know?" asked Susan. "Maybe most just choose not to talk. You could see lots of them, it's hearing you need to be concerned with."

"Anyway, can I get an answer to my question? Johnny was very concerned last night with the story you told him, and none of the other wizards in the area recognized your description. One person even said maybe you were a Bright Power yourself!"

"Don't give her any ideas," said Sparkle sarcastically.

"Obviously you're not, and now that I know it's you, and you're hanging around with my niece, I would like a few assurances."

"What, that I'm not a danger to her? Why would have I handed over the cup, after working so hard to give it a spirit, if I meant you all harm? I'm here to save your world, not cause trouble."

"Yes," admitted Sparkle. "Any trouble she causes is totally inadvertent. Believe me."

Susan was going to tell her story again, but Nita beat her to the first word.

"It all started when I went sideways and found Susan waiting for me in the parallel world I found myself in," she began, going on to tell the rest of the story of what she had seen Susan doing while she was here.

Annie digested the story for a few moments after Nita finished telling it. "I guess it does explain a few things, like why she suddenly appeared right after you got here. And why you both disappear as you do. I figured it was just you hanging out in town, but that didn't feel right to me. And I could have sworn you had just fallen out of the world, that must have been when you were working with the cup. But you came back and seemed normal so I passed it off as just one of those weird feelings. Guess I should have paid more attention."

"I was perfectly safe," insisted Nita. "I wouldn't have hung out with her if I didn't."

"Someone who can beat up a Bright Power is *safe*? And did you really defeat a reenactment of the Lone One who was hunting?"

"Easily," insisted Susan.

"I was hoping she was just exaggerating. No such luck. So, what do we do now?"

"We'll get the vessel of air today, if what my spell told me holds. After that, Bidy can forge the proper spear she's whining about needing and we can get this thing done."

"Oh, simple as that, is it?"

"I find most things are, if you apply yourself to them. Applying a bit of magic here and there doesn't hurt either."

"Wait, there was a wizard meeting last night? Great, what was it about?" asked Nita.

"Mainly the current situation and what we're going to do about it. Probably a quarter of the time spent discussing if we should use that spell I guess you two came up with."

"Three," corrected Sparkle.

"Yes, you three, sorry. In the end everyone looked it over and said there weren't any hidden meanings or traps in it, and they decided to. So they were going to wake the stone up with it early this morning. That meant we were only two treasures away from being ready. And you say the vessel for air will be in hand soon?"

"After we fight off some things called Drow, yes. Maybe one of them has it?"

"I hope not! No, it couldn't be used by something like that, unless it was really corrupted or something. And we would feel it in the very air of Ireland if something like that had happened."

"So there you are."

"I guess we owe you some thanks and an apology. You were doing all this work for us, and we distrusted you. I'll speak to Johnny about you, tell him you're on the level. Even if I can hardly believe it. Other realities, outside our own parallel worlds. Amazing."

"Don't worry, she brings it on herself. So she really has no cause to complain," explained Sparkle.

"Still, thank you. Both of you."

"Of course."

Annie went to make some phone calls, and the three slipped out the front door and sat down in a swing on the front porch.

"What now?" asked Sparkle. "We should probably head away from the farm for the moment."

"Just a second," said Nita, looking at Susan. "Why didn't you tell me my aunt was a wizard?"

"Uh, excuse me, but she's your aunt. I didn't think I would have to tell you something so obvious about your own family. Even you admitted you should have known."

"Maybe, but now I'm more determined than ever to learn this *Magic Sense* of yours."

"Why *didn't* you know, anyway? I mean you have that book that lists all wizards everywhere, right? You never thought to yourself 'hey, wonder if I have any relatives that are wizards, that would be great!' I mean there must be wizard stuff you might want to talk to a family member about, rather than a stranger. Maybe something they've been through you're having trouble with?"

"I don't know why she wasn't listed. She should have been. It seems rather stupid that she wasn't, isn't it?"

"I'm sure your book of wizardry had its reasons... even if we can't figure out what they might be."

"Sure, let's leave it at that. So why should we leave the farm?"

"If trouble is going to find us, and it will, best to be away from this place when it does. I would hate to turn this farm into a battleground."

"Why would it come here just because you're here?" asked Nita. "Conceited much?"

"It's just the reality of the situation," explained Sparkle. "Trouble is drawn to us so that we can solve it and get XP. Same with fights. Remember that little girl that hunted you down in the street? Or that lady with the three grandsons?"

Susan nodded. "I am a magnet for that sort of thing it seems."

"The point is, no matter where we go, something will happen because that's how a *Paragon's* reality works. We bring a little of that reality wherever we go, so that same thing will happen here."

"We can hang out outside of town, I guess," said Nita. "There's a lot of empty land around here, that would be fine for a battle."

"Not too empty, they'll have to come from somewhere."

“We’ll figure that out when we get there. Come on.”

The three hung out within sight of the town, but far enough way that the townspeople wouldn’t have to get involved. That was the plan, anyway. About one o’clock a group of police cars came screaming down the road, sirens blaring, and roared past them.

“They seemed in a pretty big hurry,” observed Nita.

“You don’t think...” trailed off Susan.

“Come on, we’ve got to get over there!” said Nita, about to take off running.

“Wait!” shouted Susan. “We’ll fly there, it’ll be faster.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot. Magic.”

“You forgot. Honestly. *Flight.*”

Susan and Nita stayed low to the ground, skimming the road on the way into the city. What met their eyes was a scene from a motion picture, but not a camera was in sight.

*Right, no cell phones,* thought Susan, as she calmly looked the scene over. *I guess there is some advantage to living in a less developed age. But what happens when they invariably develop them? Stuff like this uploaded to youtube, or their equivalent, will start getting harder and harder to explain away.* Police officers were putting shot after shot into human sized creatures seemingly made of some kind of rock or stone. They had smooth heads, no features to speak off, and were basically rampaging about destroying everything in sight. Punching through walls of buildings, scattering bystanders, even flipping over a car or two.

“Great, no eyes, or nose apparently,” remarked Susan. “This is The Darkness for sure. Wonder if it’s here someplace?”

“Why would it be that?” asked Nita.

“It knows how I fight. Look at them. I could dazzle the whole lot of them if they had eyes. Or put them all to sleep if they breathed. It looks like they don’t do either, at least not in the way we understand. Tricky, very tricky.”

One thing that worked to their advantage was they didn’t seem to move very quickly, as anyone running away seemed to completely outpace them. A steady stream of people was moving away from the area, as cops who were not shooting tried to maintain order. As far as the gunfire went, they didn’t seem to notice, and were carrying on as though not under heavy fire from half a dozen uniformed men.

*And where are the uniformed woman?* Susan *tisk*ed under her breath. *We can be cops too, you know.*

“They’re really here,” breathed Nita. “And there’s no way we can... no way I can fight them. Not with wizardry, at least not here anyway. And the guns aren’t doing anything! What are we going to do?”

“No, probably too high a *DTR.*” *Or maybe some kind of amazing LUCK, to just make the cops miss?* “Leave them to me. You can use some of the pins if you want. Distract any that are going for a person until I can-”

“I... don’t have them. You think I’m going to just carry something that dangerous around?”

“You- What? Aarg! They aren’t dangerous. Just... just go hide or something then.”

“Sorry.” She moved off.

“Uh, wizards,” said Susan, getting her *Enhance Sword* from her *Pocket Dimension* with the spell. While she did, Sparkle put *Acceleration* on her, as normal. *Here I was, coming into this world, thinking that as they didn’t have wands, they might be worth a bit more. But no... it’s all ‘overlay’ this and ‘we don’t carry weapons’ that. Aren’t they supposed to be fighting this Lone Power guy? How do they expect to do that when they don’t have anything to actually fight with but wizardry, which it seems can “saturate” an area and make itself useless? Wait, if no one can do wizardry because of this “overlay” then wouldn’t that “overlay” go away in time? Why would it hang around? Does magic have some kind of half-life? And why couldn’t wizardry be used outside it to sweep that “radiation” away and make the area safe-*

“Oh crap!” Susan’s thoughts were broken as she looked back to the scene in front of her.

Several meters away one of the Drow had gotten tired of being shot at, and was currently ripping the door off the car that the cop was hiding behind. As the world was moving in slow motion she saw him lift the door to pound it into the guy, and as she had seen them flipping cars over, she knew how strong these suckers were.

*Don't have time to get my armor on and get over there!* she thought, panicked. *I hope I'm close enough!*

*"Transposition!"* she cast, putting energy in to increase her range. She wanted to swap the position of the officer with one of the Drow that was further away, and with the energy she dropped, plus the bonus to *Mercury* spells she got from having *Acceleration* up it worked, even casting instantly. The Drow smashed the door through the head of what was now another Drow, confusing them both. The officer whirled around, wondering what the heck had just happened. Susan didn't have time to explain it, she just waited two segments and said her trigger word, "blade."

She became an *Avatar of War*.

Both weapons burst into flames, and her armored form drew every eye nearby. About to now enter combat, her nature as a *Paragon* allowed her to survey the battlefield instantly. As though someone, in a higher dimension, was looking down upon it like an RTS game. Just like that, she knew where everyone was and what the current combat situation was. There were seven cops in the area, apart from the one she had just *Transposed*, hiding behind their cars. There were seven "civilians" milling about, having come out of shops to see what the confusion was or just being caught up in the action when the drow attacked. It looked like at least three were in close quarters "combat" with drow, a mother trying to defend her child, a woman alone, and a man, all about five meters away from each other about three shops down. That put them at the far edge of the battlefield, meaning Susan would have to get past the cop cars, and fight past at least four drow to get to them. Two drow were punching holes in a nearby shop, where terrified people were screaming inside, and two were beating up cars parked outside of the shops for some reason.

Susan gripped her swords tightly. *Slash All has a range of M, easily enough to hit all of them I can see, but the problem is those attacking people won't know it's me hitting them. They'll just go on attacking what's in front of them, and being pummeled by one of these things means death for a normal person. I need to get those people to safety!*

"Our priority is keeping those people safe," she shouted to Sparkle, pointing down the street to the terrified figures scrambling around trying to avoid blows by the nearby drow.

"You got it," Sparkle replied, mentally reviewing her known spells. *Good, she isn't just going to recklessly attack? She must be seeing their health levels and knows one or two blows won't cut it. Get those people out of here first, then concentrate on taking down the drow. That seems reasonable.*

Both rolled *Initiative* and shifted into combat time, it was time to take out some bad guys!

Drow Combat

Time: Just then

Place: Some random street in Ireland

Sparkle, by nature of being a cat and thus, having a superior REFlexes to her “owner” the “mere human,” got the highest *Initiative* and went first. She took her free 1/10 movement (that being a two meter sprint to under the nearest police car), and cast *Elemental Line: Wind* with zero *deferred delay*. She was getting a plus ten to the casting check from *Acceleration*, while she “lost” six because that’s how long the spell normally took to cast. This gave her a net bonus of four, meaning she got a seventeen total on her check. She managed a line fourteen meters long, just enough to stretch across the battlefield and hit five of the drow, including the one harassing the mother and daughter. It also lit up the battlefield, as a huge magical circle spread out from underneath her, alerting everyone that something strange was going on. Technically something strange was already going on, so perhaps it would be more accurate to say “something even stranger.” The drow thus got their chance to dodge, though only one managed to beat the seventeen that Sparkle had gotten.

Susan also instantly cast something, *Transposition*, this time taking a further penalty for having a sword in her hand as she made the required gestures. She made up the difference with energy, getting a nineteen total on the check. The man she was trying to switch with, freaked out by being attacked by this creature and now seeing magic swirling around himself, actually spent some energy on RESolve to resist because he didn’t know what the heck was going on. He got two less than he needed, and he and Susan swapped positions.

“Hey little one!” she called down to the drow, who now looked up in seeming surprise that the man it was trying to beat the crap out of suddenly turned into an armored figure with two flaming swords.

Sparkle, a police officer, and drow “four” now went, the one with a car door smashed over the top of it. It busted out of the door with a roar, intelligent enough to realize something magical had happened to it. The officer uselessly shot at the nearest drow, which of course pinged off his stony hide. Sparkle felt changing a winning strategy was a silly idea and moved up again, now underneath the lead police car. She again cast *Elemental Line: Wind* at her four bonus, and got an eighteen this time. (She had spent an additional energy, remembering her *Energy Boost* skill and thus, got that extra energy back) This gave her a line 1m longer than before, and she was able to hit six this time. The drow again tried to dodge, but even spending four energy, none managed it. Howls of anguish were heard, as most of the drow now took a second hit, but none dropped.

*These things are pretty tough*, Sparkle thought to herself. *I can see why Susan throws so much energy into stuff she does. When you want something to go down, you want it to go down NOW. Taking two Elemental Line spells in a row is pretty harsh. Though my rating isn’t so great, and I haven’t put extra energy in to raise my damage potential. Ah well, at least they’re moving in slow motion compared to us. We’ll make it through.*

Susan looked to her left, where the woman was backing away from a drow about to swing at her. She made a free action *Magic Combat* but as she only had a two rating, her result of seven was pretty low. Oddly, she realized the drow over there would strike at delay ten, where she was at delay four. She wasn’t sure about the drow right in front of her. *Okay, my original plan was to hold my action until this one here was about to hit me, then release Transposition and make him hit his buddy. But couldn’t I do it the other way around? It’s not like this thing can get through my armor or anything.*

Chuckling, she took her free movement to run around the drow she was facing so that she was in the same relative position to the drow attacking the woman was. She started casting, taking four segments and insuring her spell would go off so that the other drow wouldn’t be able to react in time once it started swinging.

And yes, Susan’s desire to show off trumped her desire to take these drow out as quickly as possible. To be fair, as long as no one died she could heal them with the *Alleviation*

knife when it was over, and six segments *was* only 1.2 seconds. The only other *Paragon* in the area able to appreciate a time interval that small was used to that sort of behavior from her by now. That didn't mean she approved or anything, but gave a slight shake of the head and waited for her turn again, realizing she was going to do most of the damage dealing for the next few segments.

At the same time, two officers got off another shot and one civilian that was in the clear turned and headed north, catching the attention of drow "ten" who decided running down this terrified person might be a whole lot of fun. As a point of interest, the one officer got a headshot, and rolled max damage, which at least gave the drow standing there beating the hood of the car a single penalty point. (The damage was non-lethal.)

Sparkle, wondering if Susan was for some bizarre reason ignoring the woman and child that were in peril or just trusting her to take care of it, fired off another *Elemental Line: Wind* with extra energy. She put in four this time, getting back two from her *Energy Boost* and stretching across the battlefield twice. This hit the three in front of her, the one harassing the woman, one standing out in the open, and the one about to take off after the fleeing person. She got a twenty six total, and there was no way anything within miles of here could dodge that. They tried, and failed. Amazingly, even given the higher damage potential, none dropped.

At the same time, four drow got an action. One swung against Susan, getting a twelve and clanging off her armor harmlessly. One smashed in a car window that was right next to it. One started moving towards Nita, who was still staring straight ahead as she hadn't moved in the last second. It went barreling towards her, having to cover about six meters before it could be within striking distance. Lucky for her, an officer was right there and grabbed her, pulling her to the left behind the car where he was crouched. The last one that could go this segment took a step forward, brandishing what was left of the car door and swinging against officer "two." The officer tried to dodge, missed it by one, and got smashed for twelve damage, going down with a broken left leg. He screamed.

Sparkle was up again, and looked over, over the cars, to where the scream was coming from. The officer was on the ground, clutching at his now shattered leg, and she had to decide between putting *Regeneration* on him or just getting that drow with the piece of door in his hand away from the guy. She choose the later, as she was in a good spot for a "*Thrust*", which she cast instantly. She got a twenty six to activate it, but underestimated the STRength of these things, as her target got a twenty eight to resist.

"I declare the use of card 22, *failure*," she said, and time jumped back a split second, making the resistance check fail. This slammed the drow into the one right behind him, flipped them both over the hood of the car behind them, and down the street. The TR wasn't enough to hurt them, but at least it bought the poor guy with the broken leg some time to crawl behind the cars.

Officer "one" ran to his friend, shaking off the sight of the drow somehow magically being blown off their feet. He started dragging the guy with the broken leg south, behind the cars and the other officers. Nita ran to help him, and together the two of them got him up on their shoulders so he could be dragged away.

Drow "fourteen" by this time had seen the commotion and magic being thrown against his comrades, and started making his way towards the position of the officers. Sparkle noticed, throwing up an *Elemental Line: Wind* which shot around the cars, in front of the officer, and then back around, hitting the now battered but still up drow in front of her. The two running drow couldn't exactly stop and again, they couldn't beat a twenty seven result anyway. (Sparkle was now at nineteen energy) Finally, two of them dropped, having taken massive amounts of damage to the body. They were still alive, but at least there were two less

to worry about now. Four officers shot, two missed because their targets were taken down, the other two did superficial damage.

It was finally segment ten, so Susan's spell went off, and she switched places with the drow about to attack the woman. It attacked the drow that had punched Susan instead, but the other drow got a lucky dodge roll in and avoided the blow.

*Blast, all that and it missed? Forget this.*

Susan used her *Off Hand* action to slice the blade through the air, doing a called shot to the bodies of all the drow. With ten energy put into COOrdination she still managed an 18, hitting ten and only missing one in range. This dropped another one, luckily, the one trying to pummel the mother and daughter. One drow leapt over the police car and sprang upon an officer, who tried to get a shaky shot off at it at close range, rather than dodging. It didn't even slow the thing, and it smashed the officer to the ground, doing eleven damage to his chest. Nita, being right next to all this, screamed, which was probably not the best thing to do given that would probably attract attention.

With the drow down, the mother and daughter scrambled back towards the two shops behind them, intending to run around to the back and hide. Drow "nine," having dodged the blow from the teleporting drow looked left where Susan had gone. The woman now in front of Susan chose this moment to faint dead away, as the rock creature she had been trying to fend off now became an enormous armored thing, which was not very reassuring. More drow broke off their assault of various inanimate objects and ran towards the police officers. Luckily Sparkle was also going on this segment, but she wasn't sure of the best course of action to take. The drow that had landed on the officer couldn't be targeted, not without hitting the unfortunate guy beneath him. Her only other attack spells were touch based, and not lethal enough to take out creatures who could survive *Line* after *Line*. She reluctantly targeted the other four that were nearby, hoping maybe to take them out and afterwards get off a *Destruction* with the last of her energy. This took out three, leaving two standing near the officers.

The drow that had been thrown by *Thrust* was now back and racing towards the officers again, but Sparkle went before him, spinning in a circle and sending an *Elemental Line: Wind* all the way around the cars, hitting the two lone drow, but bringing down neither.

Nita said some words, concentrating on the man who was about to be pounded by a drow, but Susan was too far away to hear them and Sparkle wasn't paying enough attention to worry about it. The guy that was down acted, trying to roll the drow off himself, but could hardly do more than thrash weakly, given the chest wound he had received. Civilian "one" made it into the nearest store, and getting a fifteen on a PERsonality check, held the door open for the mother carrying her child and motioned them to get inside.

Sparkle was up again, and with only twelve energy left, again sent a *Line* out, intercepting the two nearest drow. One kept coming, one actually died. With thirty six damage to the head, it was two over *gone* and it dropped to the ground as its head exploded. Still, Sparkle sighed to see that drow "three" was still on the move. Drow "nine" crashed into Susan, trying to bring her down. She didn't dodge, as that would only increase her delay, but she did make an opposed STRength check with the creature to stay standing. It being somewhat wounded, Susan went nowhere, and the drow scabbled at her armor trying to knock her over.

It was finally Susan's turn again, so she looked down at the drow. "Quit it," she said, swinging her primary blade, and again making a called shot to the body of all the drow she could see. That was a nineteen, while the highest dodge by a drow was a seventeen, so she hit all of them. One near her went down, so she swung with her left as well, doing further damage and increasing her delay again by eight. This dropped a pathetic two, leaving one chasing a civilian, the one nearest her, the one still raising a fist to pound into the police officer, and one that had been *Thrust* and was nearing the battlefield again.

*About time, Sparkle thought to herself, as she scampered under the cars to the final drow. She didn't have Magic Combat so she just threw her remaining nine energy into Destruction, casting instantly and targeting the drow's head. As expected, this only gave her a plus one bonus because the spell normally took seven segments to cast. With the insanely high DTR of these creatures she missed it by three, and declared the use of card seven, a success. The drow's head exploded into powder, and Sparkle got three energy back from her Energy Boost, leaving her with three.*

*Okay, maybe I should have made that activatable item after all. There's still time, I'll look through the book again, now that I know more what we're up against. There must be something that could have helped in this situation.*

Drow "nine" got in another hit against Susan, but which bounced off her armor with a clang. She double swung, again going up by eight, and dropping all but one of the drow, the furthest one away from her.

*Seriously? I mean I realize these guys have forty two health to lose before they die but this is getting ridiculous. I saw how many times Sparkle cast that Elemental spell. I suppose I shouldn't complain, I am hitting all of them so in reality I'm doing a lot of damage per eight delay, it's just spread out over a bunch of targets. I wonder, if I put my Elemental Materia on the blade, could I do three types of damage to them at once? The physical damage, the fire damage from Avatar, and the Materia damage. Ah, no, that would only make the sword cut count as elemental damage, not actually do elemental damage. I would need a different spell for that.*

With only one left, Susan sprinted over to it and sliced it in half. She could see it only needed two more points of damage to drop, which she did.

"There's wounded people here!" shouted Nita, waving her over. Susan sighed, putting the *Enhance Sword* back in her *Pocket Dimension* with a spell and swapping her main sword over. She pulled the knife out and advanced on the officers. As she did she glanced at the knife, which had not burst into flames like the sword had. *Huh, the magic is smart enough to know this isn't a weapon. Neat!*

"Stay- stay back!" one of them shouted. "I'll shoot!"

"Yeah? And what good is that going to do you?" Susan retorted.

"It's okay, she's going to help," insisted Nita.

"How do you know? That thing is enormous! Where did all these monsters come from?"

"Just trust me."

"Trust you? Not another step, or I swear..."

"Oh, go ahead. Just try not to bounce it into someone else I'll have to heal."

He pulled the trigger.

Sadly, he was so shaky that even with her +1 size modifier, her passive dodge of fourteen beat his roll of nine easily, so the bullet went wide, shattering a window behind them.

"Are you crazy?" yelled an officer, grabbing the gun and pulling it down. "There's innocent people around here!"

"But... that thing..."

"If it attacks us, fine. Until then, I'll treat it as a friendly. Those creatures aren't dead, aren't they? And we weren't hurting them at all."

"Yeah, what was that light show?" asked another, gun down but still tense.

"Trust me," said Susan, getting close to the first injured man. "You don't want to know. Now this may seem a bit unorthodox, but it will heal you," she said to the guy.

"Keep that thing away from me!" he shouted, trying to inch his way away from the blade.

“Yeah, really need to change the shape of this thing. Oh, hold still, it won’t even hurt. Well, not as much as a broken leg will, anyway.” She plunged it in. The officer’s guns came up again.

“No, please, it’s okay!” insisted Nita. “Just watch.”

“Hey, I do feel better,” said the officer, as Susan pulled the knife out. “How about that?”

“How about that. Now for the other.” She went over and healed him as well. “Anyone else?”

The officers shook their heads, so Susan put the knife away again.

“Now will someone explain to me what’s going on?” asked the one who had shot at her.

“What are those creatures? Who or what in the world are you?”

“Ah, yes, how to explain...” stalled Susan. “Would you believe me if I told you they were just a bad dream?”

“A what?”

Susan took a deep breath and cast *Somnolent Smog* without words, taking the maximum time and throwing in some energy to compensate for the penalty. She got a sixteen, more than an average person could roll on a CON check, and they all slumped to the ground, asleep. She held it a second, making sure they wouldn’t wake up when they hit the ground, and let it go.

Nita was also sleeping peacefully.

*Whoops.*

“Now what?” asked Sparkle, who had known what was coming and also not breathed the mist.

“Somehow destroy the evidence, I guess? How are you doing on energy? Can you use *Destruction* on them?”

“I have three left. I’m thinking no.”

“Ah. Wow, you really did go all out. Sorry I wasn’t more help, seems you did most of the work there. That called shot and off hand action really killed me. I can see it’ll work, but I’ll need that *Augment Skill: Off Hand* to really take advantage of it. It sucks *Acceleration* can’t make that faster too, but ‘No other skills, Backgrounds or other abilities modify off-hand *Delay.*’ as they say.”

“Who says that? To be fair, the entire combat still only took about five seconds.”

“True, very true. I’m going to drain energy from any that are alive, they should sleep for a little while.”

“Drain energy? Are you out too?”

“No, but just in case more show up, I figure I better be prepared. It’ll give me a minute to think of what to do with all these bodies too. If we have to do what I think we’re going to have to do, I’ll need all the energy I can get.”

In the end, she found she could lift them physically, instead of relying on the *Telekinesis* spell as she had feared. So she simply opened a *Teleportal* out in the middle of a field she had seen while riding around the bus through Ireland. She then picked them up, one at a time, and tossed them through. By this time, people were getting curious again as to what was happening, but Susan staring them down seemed to cure that pretty quickly. When the bodies were gone she hefted Nita, stepped through the portal herself, let Sparkle jump through, and was about to close it when an elf on horseback rode up and held up a hand in greeting.

Susan stared. *A real elf! Now how about... oh right, is that the guy I had to impress to get the sword? Let’s hope so.*

“How’s it going?” she asked, trying to be casual.

The elf stared at her. “Really?” it finally asked, quite sternly.

*Oh crap, I just doomed us all?*

## Talking to Elves

Place: The field side of the portal back to town

Time: Seconds after Susan greeted the elf

The figure on horseback and Susan stared at each other for long seconds. The elf had black hair, pointed ears, (*So I suppose he could be Vulcan, rather than an elf?*) regal clothes, and a slightly odd look about him in terms of how reality was perceived in these parts. His horse was similar, in that it looked more regal than “simple” Earth horses. It was pure white, stood stock still, and also seemed to look at her with some intelligence. Susan was sure most would call the elf handsome, if they were into that sort of thing, but she wasn’t impressed or intimidated. It was a pretty nice horse, though.

Still under *Acceleration* because technically as she was still on the battlefield it was the same *scene*, she did a couple of quick sensings of him. She got an eleven on *Magic Sense*, ten on *Spirit*, and eight on *Dimension*. Sparkle assisted her with a twelve on that one, giving her plus two, enough to succeed on all of them. He was magical, had a bunch of energy, and wasn’t from around here.

*As if I couldn’t tell just by looking at him. But it is nice to have confirmation. Wait, if he’s not from around here and has all that energy...*

“Declare yourself,” she said, putting a hand out and willing her sword to come back into her hand from where she had stabbed it into the ground to pick up drow bodies. She could feel where it was, and didn’t need to look as the *Material Link* now worked into the sword guided it into her hand. It burst into flames again, and she held it up.

“Impressive,” said the elf, “but then I’ve already seen your abilities in combat. That many opponents, in so short a time? Even our warriors would be hard pressed to match such a feat.”

*Okay, not exactly answering my question... The trouble with this world is, it seems like nobody actually lives here! Is this guy The Darkness, or will starting a fight with him be another Biddy situation? I need to ask Silverstreak if there’s some way of detecting just that presence, as Dimension Sense isn’t cutting it around here. Of course, hopefully most worlds don’t have this much “pollution.”*

“Thank you. To be fair, most of the work done that time was accomplished by my cat. I’m saving my good stuff for our assault on Balor or whatever his name his.”

“That seems a wise choice. Wait, did you say cat?”

“Hello!” said Sparkle, looking up at the figure.

The elf shook his head. “It is no wonder the queen has sent her fool to pick up this lot. It seems fitting all around. Have you finished your work here, then?”

Susan looked past him, to where the battle had taken place. She had counted, and she had all the drow bits on this side of the *Teleportal*. Those not dead she had killed by draining their energy until they perished, so she was back to her maximum and then some. She had wanted to spend some of it on *Repair*, like for the windows and such that had been broken.

*Too many witnesses, though. Even if I repaired the damage, a lot of people saw that attack happen. Too many to just pass off as some kind of shared hallucination. And with the attack over, people will be gathering to see what happened, and Nita won’t like me throwing magic around where people can see. Oh well.*

“On that side, yes,” she replied. “I still have to bury these guys on this side. You want to come through and wait?”

The elf seemed puzzled. “You would show such compassion, even to monsters like these?”

“What compassion?” she asked, annoyed. “Even out here in the country I can’t just leave a bunch of drow bodies laying about. If someone stumbled into them, think of the repercussions. They would think them aliens or something, and call in the government, and seal off the area, and generally freak out. I’m hiding them, not performing last rites.”

“Yes, I see the difference now. If you will allow me through your marvelous gateway here, I shall ‘hold my horse’ as you humans say, while you perform this task. I hope it will not take long, the queen should not be kept waiting.”

"Then she should have come to see me," Susan muttered, stepping back. The horse carefully stepped through the *Teleportal*, and after Sparkle hopped through (Nita had been carried through first thing) she closed it. With that, the *scene* ended, and Susan's magic dropped away, leaving her struggling to heft the now too heavy blade. The world also sped up as *Acceleration* dropped away too. "You can wait over there," she said, pointing. "That tree should be far enough away."

The elf looked over at it. "Do you fear the secret of your magics being given away if I watch? You need not, I have no interest in them." Susan glared at him. "Yes, I noticed they were not wizardry, but you used them against our enemies, and so I will not question them."

*I'm glaring at you because that means were you standing around watching somewhere, and didn't bother to lift a finger to actually help me. Thanks a lot.* She did not say this out loud, rather; "No, you're not from this dimension. I can't tell you from another dimensional traveler I'm here to drive from this world. No offense, but I've already beaten up one wrong person in my time here, I would not want to beat up another. As you have yet to declare yourself or your intentions as I requested, I am forced to treat you as a potential enemy. Now please *go over there.*"

The elf shook his head. "It seems arrogance is not limited to only the Sidhe. Very well, if it will reassure you." He wheeled his horse around and trotted over to the trees some distance away that Susan had pointed out.

*No, what would reassure me is knowing who the freak you are. Had I not been expecting someone to bring me the vessel of air, I would have already torn you apart given how suspicious you're acting. As it is, you can go be butthurt over there where I can keep an eye on you. You don't seem the type The Darkness would possess either, you're not really impressive or evil looking enough. But that doesn't mean you aren't.*

"So how exactly are we going to bury these guys?" asked Sparkle, as Susan reabsorbed her sword.

"I can think of a spell or two that might work. Worst case, we stick them in my *Personal Dimension* for a bit, and Silverstreak can have them when we get back to the Hub. Let's see now..." She got her book out and started paging through it. "Uranus spells deal with the earth, there must be something. Shoot! *Passageway* deals exclusively with stone, rather than just the ground. Same with *Sculpt...* wait, here it is. *Excavate!* That will dig up the earth around here. Now, can I pick it up in a couple of minutes..."

Sparkle indicated she wanted to look too, so Susan showed the book to her.

"It's going to deposit the dirt in a big pile," she read, "and look disturbed."

"Ah, true. I figure I can shove the dirt back with *Telekinesis*, but you're right, it'll still look like a recently dug hole. Someone could get curious and start digging. Wait!" She paged through some more. "How about *Foliage*? That'll make grass grow if I only maintain it for a turn. That should cover up any sign of work here."

Sparkle looked it over as well. "Sounds good to me."

So the two got to work understanding the spells enough to cast them from writings. Susan got a twelve and a seventeen while reading *Foliage*, which was enough. She then went back to *Excavate* and read it over.

"Wait a second. *Foliage*, which can basically restore an entire forest to life in under five minutes, is grade five, right?"

"Yeah."

"But a spell to simply dig a hole in the ground is grade seven? And it's *I* duration, meaning you can't concentrate on making the hole bigger, one shot is all I get. I don't get it."

"Maybe because targeting a creature made of earth destroys it? I mean you could have used this on that golem that gave us some trouble back with Louise, right?"

She tilted the book this way and that, thinking it over. "I guess. Still, maybe I should ask the book for a lesser grade version of the spell that just digs up a bit of ground while I concentrate. I wonder." She flipped through to the Mercury section. "Do you think *Telekinesis* would work on the ground before we dug it up? I mean, once it's a pile of dirt, it's a single object- one, one pile of dirt, ah ha ha. Could we basically yank a portion of ground up here with that spell?"

Sparkle considered. "Probably not. You would have to target each grain of dirt with the spell, as however heavy a chunk you could lift with your check result would still count as the *entire* Earth at that point. And if you started shoving the entire planet around, well, let me off first."

"I'll give you plenty of warning." Susan grinned. *Huh, so I could lift a whole car, even if it's made of pieces because all the pieces make up a single object, a car. But targeting the ground to make a hole doesn't work even if they weigh the same. Magic is so weird.* "Okay, let's hope I get enough on my checks." She went back to *Excavate* and started reading it over. This time her checks were a twenty three and a fifteen, enough to understand the spell well enough to cast it. "Great!" she said, magic swirling around the area as she envisioned the symbols on the ground nearby. "And away we go."

Fourteen segments later, the ground vanished from under the drow and they fell into a good sized hole. Susan then shoved the dirt as she had planned, and created a *Temporary Tool*, a hoe, to smooth the dirt out. One final casting, *Foliage*, and the area was so passably green again that unless someone was specially looking for this spot, no one would ever know what had happened there.

"Time itself will make the area look more natural," she mused, looking around. "I think we're done here."

"Our elven friend seems anxious to be on his way," remarked Sparkle. "And remember, they really have no incentive to help up, so do try to be polite."

"Oh, I always try," allowed Susan. "It just hardly ever comes out that way. Let's go wake up Nita before he bursts a blood vessel or something."

She gently shook the wizard, who fluttered her eyelids and then sat bolt upright.

"What's... where? Susan? What's going on?"

"Sorry about that," Susan apologized. "You got caught in my sleep spell from before. The police were asking some uncomfortable questions, so I did the expedient thing of making them take a little nap."

"You put them to sleep? What about the drow?"

"All taken care of." She stomped her foot. "Maybe not six feet under, but good enough for government work."

"But all that damage! You should have woken me up, now it's too late."

"Too late? For what? I thought about repairing the windows and stuff but that would have just meant more magic, and I figured you wouldn't approve. By that point the area was starting to get crowded with people."

"No, no, we could have... I don't know, patched it or something."

"Patched... it?"

"Yeah. Just copied a part of reality from a parallel dimension where that attack didn't happen there. It would have set everything to rights."

"Uh, Nita, don't know if you remember this, but you couldn't do a simple *Teleport* spell without backfiring it. Now you want to copy space from another dimension? Something tells me that's a little more complex, and that overlay is still there, right? You can't just ignore it for the little stuff, then hope you can pull off some crap I couldn't even do."

"Yeah, even I think your sense of scale is a bit skewed," admitted Sparkle. "Plus, what if you missed? Got the reality where the attack was still going on, or in fact was worse than it was here? You wouldn't want to bring something like that over to this world, right? Is your wizardry that selective? And what happens to the reality you're pulling all this from? Could you accidentally switch them? That wouldn't be polite. No, I think we really did all we could do, given the constraints of the area."

"Who is that?" Nita had just caught sight of the figure coming towards them.

"Oh, him? Good question, he won't tell me. Hopefully he's here to deliver the vessel of air, but he hasn't said one way or the other. All he's done is mention a queen."

"The queen," said the elf, riding over to them. "Are you well, wizard?"

"Yes, thank you," said Nita, staring up at him.

"Then perhaps we can finally be about this."

"Not until I get a little bit more explanation." Susan crossed her arms over her chest.

"You've told me nothing. For all I know, you are The Darkness about to lead us into a trap. We

expect someone to come deliver the vessel, and so it shows up after taking you over. Pretty convenient.”

The elf sighed. “The queen holds summer court. I do not know how you knew it was her intention to hand over Fragarach, the sword of air, but that is her desire.” He looked a bit troubled.

“Fraggle Rock?”

“Fragarach.”

“Eh, close enough. Very well, lead on, good sir!” Susan gave a start and almost pulled her blade out again as two horses appeared out of nowhere. “Nice trick,” she admitted. *Okay, where they invisible, or just summoned here? And I thought magic around here took words? He didn't seem to do anything, but he could have some kind of Spell Symbol same as me. That would impress the uninitiated, just like I use it.*

“You can ride, I hope?” the elf asked.

“I'm a bit rusty, but I have the skill,” answered Susan. “Nita?”

“Not so much,” she admitted.

“No problem, I've got energy to burn before it naturally dissipates. *Augment Skill: Riding.*”

With that, the two managed to get onto their horses with ease (Susan had cast the spell both on herself and Nita) and they followed the elf into a parallel world where a very beautiful elf with really, really long hair lounged in a simple seat under a pavilion. She was dressed in white, surrounded by attendants, and had a sword shaped bundle on her lap that was also covered in white silk.

“The greetings of gods and man to you, wizards,” she said, and her voice was pure and strong.

“And to you, majesty,” said Susan, trying for an untrained *Etiquette* check and getting a seven. Her curtsy was not very well accomplished. “So you have summoned us, so have we come before you.”

“If not without some prodding,” grumped the elf who had brought them.

“Now, now,” chided the queen, “They know little of queens or of us, any longer. And you did interrupt their battle, after all.”

“We did not mean any disrespect with our tardiness,” said Nita.

“I know,” she answered, with a hint of a smile. “But now let us attend to the business that has brought you here.”

“I take it the vessel of air is in that bundle there?” asked Susan, stepping forward with an outstretched hand. “Great, with this there's only the vessel of fire left to-” She stopped as the queen's eyes widened and her attendants gasped. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the elf partially draw his blade. “What?” she snapped at him, glaring. “Oh, you saw the sword being drawn into my hand. Don't worry, I'll be good.”

“Please forgive her!” spoke up a panicked Nita, grabbing Susan and trying to pull her back. “She doesn't- She's not from- Just, please, we're honored to be chosen, I mean if it's your intention...”

“What's wrong with you?” Susan asked her, batting her hands away.

“What's wrong with you?” Nita hissed back. “Do you have any idea how offensive you're being towards them?”

Susan shook her head. “No, should I? I don't have the *Etiquette* skill, so I figured being direct was best. We're all here for the same reason. Why waste time?”

“You can't be serious!”

“I'm always serious. She may be a queen here but that means nothing to me.” She turned back to the queen. “Give it to me and we'll be on our way. I'm sure you have better things to be doing anyway.”

Some of the attendants looked ready to faint at such behavior.

“Such boldness,” said the queen. “Or is it arrogance? I thought our kind was arrogant compared to yours, but perhaps I have been away too long.”

“Yeah, I'm not really from around here, so please don't take my behavior as typical. I have a war to prepare for, and the sooner I can acquire what I need to win that war, the

sooner I can beat Balor, save your entire reality, and be on my way. So you'll have to forgive me if I skip a few of the pleasantries."

"Who's talking right now?" asked Sparkle suddenly from behind Susan. All eyes snapped to her, and even the queen seemed interested in the talking cat. Susan also spun around, meeting her eyes. A look of understanding passed between them, and Susan took a deep breath. "It is, no doubt." She closed her eyes and tried to relax. She hadn't noticed, but there had been a tension building up inside her as she had gotten closer to this place. For some reason she wanted to lash out at these people, and she couldn't imagine why.

*Oh, and you were doing so well for a while there,* chortled The Darkness inside her. *Pity, that cat seems to be on the ball this time. Much like that accursed Luna. Oh well.*

The tension drained out of her, leaving Susan facing the assembled elves. "Your majesty, I must offer an apology for my recent behavior. It's not an excuse, but there is a dark presence inside me that can sometimes influence me. It also seems able to make me forget about it, so I'm not on guard against that influence as I should be. Thank you, Sparkle, for reminding me. Perhaps you would be better to just deal with Nita before I make things worse."

The queen sat back in her chair. "I do feel a conflict of some kind within you. Perhaps you are simply the living proof that we all carry our demons with us. But what you said was true. You are here for the sword, and I am here to bestow it upon you. Approach then, Nita, and receive it."

Nita came forward as the queen unwrapped a sword and presented it to her. Susan didn't need *Magic Sense* to feel the power coming off it, and even visually the air around the blade seemed to tremble. Nita reached out a hand, but drew it back as if shocked.

"It pushed me away!"

The queen nodded. "The reason it was taken out of the world was because there was no hand strong enough to wield it. Also I think the nature of the person is taken into account, and there is more of the water than of the air about you, wizard. Perhaps your confused companion would like to take a turn?"

Susan looked over at their original guide, who still hadn't taken his hand off his sword hilt. He seemed to struggle with himself, then shoved it back and gestured for her to go ahead. She too reached for the blade, and felt herself being shoved back, the air growing uncomfortably hot around the sword. She bet she could force the issue, make some STrength or RESolve checks to touch the blade, but she backed off for the moment. "I'll have to force it," she remarked.

"As I thought," said the queen. "There is too much of the fire nature in you, and I worry, for what does air do to fire?"

"Spread it," she answered simply.

"Correct. Your power is strange to me, but I can feel it within you. To add the power of this sword to your already considerable power... I must admit the idea worries me."

"Perhaps I could try it," said Sparkle, stepping up.

"Ah, forgive me, friend feline, but how would you carry such a blade?" asked the queen.

"Not physically, I admit. I'll put it in my sub-space pocket. I have the same rating as you, Susan, and I don't have anything in mine at the moment. It should be big enough."

The queen laughed. "An unconventional approach, for an unconventional day. Not that I'm even sure what you mean, exactly, but I know enough of magic to reason your meaning. Very well." She held the blade out to Sparkle, who put a paw on it and made a *Pocket* check, putting in her last three energy as her MANipulation was so low. She got a seven, not enough, but quickly declared the use of card 5, *Bonus*, for a nine that was. The sword disappeared.

"Guess I'm air enough," she said.

"Extraordinary," said the queen. "If we had more time, I'm sure your stories would be quite astonishing."

"Perhaps," admitted Sparkle. "But not yet done. Not by a long way, I think."

"Indeed. The Amadaun will see you back to your home. Good luck in your coming battle."

"Thank you, majesty," all three said.

And so the elf brought them back to the farm, and wheeled and rode away without so much as a parting word.

*Maybe I should tattoo 'The Darkness' on my hand, so I can see it all the time and get reminded of it. That way maybe things like that wouldn't happen.*

"So now what?" asked Nita.

"Now we see about fire," Susan answered, heading to the door. "And our real battle begins."

Susan put her hand on the doorknob to go back into the house and tell Nita's aunt that they had the sword, and where would she like it? However, she paused and looked around, certain that something was wrong.

"What time is it?" asked Nita, looking up at the sun. It was low in the sky, and shadows stretched across the nearby fields.

"Ah, four thirty," said Susan, looking at the watch Silverstreak had given her. The watch that automatically synchronized to whatever the local time was. "Wait, that can't be right."

"We just had lunch, how can it be almost dinnertime?" asked Nita. "Wait, I've got one thirty... what is that?"

"What is what?"

"That watch! I've never seen anything like it. Is that... some kind of shrunken down computer monitor or something? It's lit up like it is!"

Susan chuckled. "Oh, this old thing? Don't worry about this, it was given to me by the being that sent me here. I'm sure you won't have technology like this for a long time."

"I should think not. Anyway, that's really weird. I guess time ran differently between where we talked to the queen and here."

"Must be. Weird, we hadn't stayed all that long. Well, we'll just have to have a late dinner then, huh?"

"Yeah."

The three went inside, and found Annie in the kitchen looking somewhat worried.

"What's up, Aunt Annie?" asked Nita. "We got the sword, no worries. Sorry we were gone so long, we didn't realize time was different when we went to see the queen."

"Queen?"

"Of the Sidhe."

"Sidhe? I thought they were elves!" broke in Susan. "But no, wait, that is what my magic called them before, isn't it?"

"Thank goodness you didn't actually call them that. We really wouldn't have walked out of there alive!"

Susan shrugged. "Oh, we would have." She looked around. "A lot of people in this house," she remarked, her *Spirit Sense* telling her there were a lot more energy signatures in nearby rooms than was normal. She didn't have to make checks in that, it was like telling a room was hot or cold when you walked in. She could feel the energy around her, and making checks was just to tell where exactly *ley lines* were or the approximate energy of someone she was near to. "Are they wizards, come to figure out a plan for the spirit of fire?"

Annie seemed to get a little paler. "You can tell that... yes, of course you would. Nita, dear, can you just come over here?" She edged around the table and pulled Nita with her, placing the table between them and her.

"So much for the element of surprise," said a voice, and Johnny aka Shaun O'Driscoll, the highest ranking wizard in these parts walked in, followed by several other people. Each group came into the room from separate doors, so Susan couldn't help but think they were somehow trying to box her in. *But that would be a dumb thing to do.* "Fairest and fallen, greetings and defiance."

"The... what now?" asked Susan, confused.

"She can't be!" protested Nita. "There's no—"

"Are you sure?" he barked, cutting her off. "Because there's no way a couple of kids could write the spell that woke up the cup, and then the stone, on the first try. We got the reports of the drow attack in town, and cleaning up that mess was a real pain, let me tell you. I spoke to several people who said a girl matching your description turned into a giant, armor wearing, flaming sword wielding, combat machine. A dozen drow, taken down in seconds! The police officers I spoke to said they had never seen anything like it. And then you all vanished!"

"Funny way of saying thank you for saving hundreds of lives today. You're welcome, by the way. Anyway, you know how I can do all that stuff, I told you earlier. I can do *magic*. Don't complain to me that you all got stuck with mere *wizardry*."

Johnny shook his head. "I don't buy it. The simplest solution is usually the right one. Ergo, you're the Lone One, trying to disrupt our plans somehow."

"Right, by waking up the treasures for you, and then handing them over. Wait, are you calling me, is he calling me the thing that invented death in this universe?"

Nita tightly nodded her head, eyes huge.

"Oh, come on. Most of that fight wasn't even me, it was Sparkle! Tell them!"

"It was me, actually," admitted Sparkle. "I spent all my energy to do it, as those things were pretty tough to take down, let me tell you."

"Oh sure, your *cat* can do magic. Sure. Tell us another one!"

"She can, believe me if you don't believe her. What you're saying doesn't make sense," protested Nita. "Yeah, she's got some weird magic, but she's been helping us. I mean she's a little rude-"

Sparkle snorted. "You can be honest."

"Okay, she's really brusque, and uncaring of our situation, and the hardest worker I've ever seen, and terrifying in battle. But that doesn't mean... and she's possessed by some evil force, she admitted that to me." She took a step back, fearful.

"I'm not *possessed*," countered Susan. "The Darkness put some of himself into my soul before I was born, yes. If I was possessed his will would totally dominate mine, rather than just getting me to be 'brusque' as you call it. Plus I could pull him out with *Exorcise* like I did with Tom and Professor Quirrell that one time. But that's a totally different guy than your guy. I've been living with him for years, way before I set foot on this world. Man, you guys don't have truth telling spells, do you? Running right now, I mean?"

"We can't do anything like that," said Johnny.

"Typical," she snorted in reply. "I could put one up, but getting you to believe it, that's the trouble. Fine. So say I am this one or whatever you call him. If you try something, I'll just wipe you out, right? I mean the one is basically a god compared to you all, right? Though he somehow doesn't just crush you in your sleep and be done with it for some bizarre reason. That aside, if you're right I could just gesture and kill you all. So coming here like this was a stupid idea, if you're right. Now say you're wrong- and you are, F.Y.I. You attack and kill me. Now you just murdered an innocent girl and doomed your world to extinction at the hands of The Darkness. He sucks your entire reality dry of energy and moves on the next. Stupid idea. Plus you have this overlay garbage that Nita keeps saying prevents her from using wizardry around here. You attack me and get it wrong, we all go up together. Stupid idea. You don't have any real argument for this 'confrontation' because it goes badly for you no matter what you do. If you really were worried you should have just watched me and let me prove myself."

Johnny shook his head. "This was our only chance. If you carried out your plans to help your image win this time it would be too late. We can hardly fight one of you, much less two. And we knew you would be here, so this is where it had to happen."

"I won't fight you, but you won't win. I hope you realize that."

"Fight you? No, if we're right, and I think we are, there's not much we can do. Annie?"

"I don't know. I spoke to the Lone Power on my ordeal, we all did in one form or another. And I trust my niece. She doesn't feel the same."

"It's your house, so it's your call. But wizardry can't explain what she's done, and her wild story about being from another world doesn't sit right with me. Can we really risk it? If her story is true, she'll probably break out sooner or later. I just hope it gives us enough time to take care of Balor."

Annie took a deep breath, pulling Nita with her, towards the door behind them.

"Wait, what are you doing?" she said, struggling to get free. "You don't understand, what do you plan to do?"

"What we must," said Johnny sadly. As he did, everyone backed out of the room carefully.

*Great, I would have gone and replaced my spell symbols with physical combat ones rather than magical, like at home. I need a second charm bracelet. Oh well, I can cast what I want quickly enough, I've still got plenty of energy.*

"*Magic Immunity*," she cast, taking the full 1.8 seconds to cast it. She figured they couldn't possibly speak a spell against her in that time.

She was right.

Once out of the room, the assembled wizards started speaking in the wizard language they used, and Susan made her *Adaptive Skill* check to see what they were doing. She got a fourteen, modified by minus three for the grade nine spell she was now maintaining. Still more than a ten, meaning she understood what they were saying. She didn't exactly know what it all meant, as it was a pretty complex spell. Her *Adaptive Skill* allowed her to read the *Speech*, and even use wizardry if she was fed it. But actually understanding the workings of the spell, so different from her own, was something else entirely. *I really didn't want to hurt these people, so let them bounce a spell or two off me and then perhaps we can talk.*

She figured it was going to be something pretty spectacular, given the number of people arrayed against her. She crossed her arms over her chest and put on a bored look, wondering how long this was going to take. *Something about space, and folding? Whatever, it'll just bounce off and perhaps they'll see how futile-*

"You can't use that HERE!" screamed Nita, figuring out what they were doing. "Susan, get out-"

With a **snap** the spell went off, and Susan and Sparkle found themselves seemingly cut off from light and sound.

"Huh. That's different," Susan remarked, squinting to try and pierce the darkness.

"I'll say. What did they do?"

"Not sure. Hey, can you see?"

"Not a thing. You?"

"No. It can't be magical, I was immune to magic." She put her hand out, and as expected, there was the table. "Table is still there. They couldn't have needed all those wizards to cast a simple darkness spell, and we're not being leapt upon and beaten to the ground, so I'll assume something else is going on. Just a second, I'll drop *Immunity* and get a *Light* going."

She did.

The two looked around. The room was intact, but out the doors and windows there seemed to be a dark nothingness, like the room had been torn out of reality and shoved into a *Pocket Dimension*.

"Did they shunt space?" she asked, walking over to the door and doing a *Dimension Sense* outside. She rolled maximum, a thirteen, but didn't get any information from the check. "We're not in another dimension, that's for sure." She made a *Topic: Dimensions* check but got minimum (as there must always be balance in the universe) a four, so it wasn't anything she had read about in the past.

"You're pretty calm about the whole situation," remarked Sparkle.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Plus, you just reminded me of my passenger, so I'm trying to play it cool for the moment." She tapped her head.

"Ah. Well, that aside, how are we getting out of here? The air in here won't last forever, though I suppose we could use *Pure Air*."

"I got a twenty on *Magical Theory*, but only a nine (minus one) on *Magic Sense*. See what you come up with for that, because I have an idea."

"Lower, an eight."

"Okay, assist me then."

"You got it."

Both made a second check, this time at a minus one penalty. Susan again got minimum, (minus one for retrying, minus one for the *Light* spell) and Sparkle got a ten (minus one).

"Even worse now?" she shrieked. "Fine, you know what, I'm just going with my gut."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

Susan got her pistol out of the *Pocket Dimension* and activated the *Imbuing* on it, *Dead Magic*. As the space she was in was being magically twisted to basically cut it off from the rest of the universe, *Dead Magic* stopped that twisting.

The room reappeared back where it was, sound and light returning to the area.

"-had the sword of Air with them, that's why!" Nita was shouting, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"I didn't see it," said Annie.

"Sparkle had it, she put it into-" She gasped and pointed, and everyone spun.

"Now then," said Susan, leveling the pistol at Johnny, "if you're all through being hysterical, and can show a little trust for *one darn minute*, maybe we can sort this all out."

"Oh crap! How in the-" Annie started to say. Johnny interrupted her, trying more wizardry, but Susan just stood there, finger off the trigger but considering it. Whatever he was trying to do fizzled totally, and he blinked in surprise.

"I've seen that gun before," volunteered Nita. "She's telling the truth."

"Yeah, as long as this gun is out, nobody does any magic. Handy, huh? Now, you want the sword? How about you stop treating me like an enemy? Send away your little posse and we'll talk."

"What do we do?" whispered one of the men that was standing behind Johnny. "She got out, and she's right, I can't do any wizardry."

"What's that?" asked Susan. "Speak up, I'm a little hard of hearing actually, so I missed that." Rather than answer they turned away and started urgently whispering amongst themselves. "Okay, fine, sure, take your time. I'm just standing here with a *loaded gun*." She shook it at them. "Hakuna matata, I guess."

"What?" asked Nita.

"It means no worries, for the rest of your days," she singsonged, getting a three on her untrained *Singing* check. Nita looked confused. "What, don't wizards go to movies?"

"I go to movies all the time. What's that from?"

"Uh, *The Lion King*?" Nita looked at Annie, who shook her head. "You guys don't have *The Lion King* yet either?" She shook her head sadly. "I pity you. I really do."

"Doesn't that come out next year?" asked one of the wizards from the other door.

There was a general acknowledgement from the others nearby.

"Next year? Really? Huh, how about that. You should really go see it. Simba's dad dies. I still cry every time I see that stampede into the-"

"Susan! Spoilers!" chided Sparkle.

"Hey, I'm going to start spoiling every movie, book, and TV show I can think of that comes out in the next twenty years unless you people come to your senses. Then we'll start in on *Game of Thrones*- who lives and who dies."

Sparkle gasped. "You wouldn't!"

"Oh, you have no idea. Let's start with *The Mask*, that was around this time, right? Now the basic plot goes like this-

"Okay, okay!" said Johnny, raising his hands in surrender. "What do you want?"

"I want you to stop attacking me so I can give you this freaking sword and then go down to see Bidy and get the vessel for the spirit of fire so we can beat up *The Face of Balor* and I can move on to the next reality before my father or girlfriend bite the dust on some random world because you were too slow to trust!" She sucked in a huge breath. "And a pony."

"Girlfriend?"

"Bidy? The farrier?"

"She really has the sword?"

"Did she really write the spell to wake up the cup?"

"Girlfriend?"

"It's really Balor? We have to do the reenactment?"

"ONE AT A TIME!" shouted Susan over the sudden din. "You!" she said, pointing. "And anyone that says 'girlfriend' gets shot in the leg. I'm from the future, it works out." She hesitated. "Sorta. Maybe? Kinda? In another generation? Anyway, speak!"

"Uh... pass?"

Susan mulled that over. "Acceptable. Next!" She pointed again.

"You really got the sword?"

"Ah, a useful question. Thank you. Yes, we have retrieved the sword from a bunch of elves, or whatever Nita called them earlier. They were holding it because there wasn't anyone around here strong enough or whatever. Sparkle has it." She indicated her *companion* who gave a little wave with her paw. "Next!"

"Where is it?"

"Safe, and out of reach for the moment. You'll get it when I'm satisfied you won't attack me again. You."

"Uh, me? Oh, you're not the Lone Power? You really are helping us?"

"I really am helping you. Maybe I should have gotten you all together to start with, that was my bad. It might have helped, but I wasn't sure how much you could, given how you can't actually use wizardry very easily around here. Plus..." *I think The Darkness wanted me to try and go it alone, and made me think I could. I would be easier to take out in that case.*

"Anyway, I'll do that next world, promise. Sparkle, take a memo, make sure I do that."

"Got it, boss."

"Next question. You."

"You can really do magic? Real, honest to goodness magic? Not wizardry?"

"Also correct. I'd demonstrate but, gun. Well, actually I guess I *am* doing magic, technically. You can see that because you can't do any wizardry. Proof by... absence? Anyway, I broke out of your little... whatever that was, so that should be proof enough of my power. What exactly was that, anyway?"

"A space twist," answered Nita. "We used it on a dragon once, that's what led me to almost be eaten by a shark later." Susan tried to figure out how those things were related. "It was the energy cost for sealing off his treasure hoard. I did it alone, rather than a group like they did. So it probably won't hit them as hard."

"You killed a dragon? Thought wizardry was all about protecting life, you said that to me once."

Nita looked shocked. "No, no, we just sealed him up. He was senile, couldn't remember how much treasure he had. In exchange for the "Naming of Lights" we traded "The Book Which is Not Named" and sealing the area off."

"Uh huh." *Wait, 'book' which is not named? Another parallel to my world?* "Is the book actually named Tom... or Voldemort?"

"What?" Nita looked totally thrown by the randomness of that question.

"Never mind. So, where would the dragon get air from? You sealed him off, that means nothing could get inside right? But dragons still have to breathe and the only air he would have had was in the space with him. That would have lasted, what, a few minutes? I don't know how much oxygen a dragon uses." Nita looked horrified, putting her hands over her mouth. "Okay, you obviously never thought of that. Great. Moving right along, you."

That woman sputtered, obviously failing to keep up with the conversation. "Johnny mentioned you saying something about a worse threat than the Lone One?"

Susan explained about The Darkness, or Darkvoid as he was called by others. This is not recorded here because you, reading this, already know all about it.

"I think she's telling the truth," said one wizard. "She's not the Lone Power, not by a long way. I have to get back, my kids will be home from school in a few minutes. Let me know when the next meeting is."

Many others agreed they had places to be, and that Susan was fine in their book if Nita vouched for her. They had seemed impressed when they heard her mention that book, and many had sort of stared off into the distance as if reading something only they could see. After that they had nodded and relaxed.

“All right,” Johnny sighed, “put it away. You have my word as a wizard that we will not attack you further.”

“And?” prompted Susan.

“And?”

“And you’re...”

“And we’re... sorry?”

“There it is. Fine.” She cut the spell, bringing magic back to the area, and popped the gun into her *Pocket Dimension* again. Those that were left watched interestedly, so she took the full time so they could see the magical circle her powers produced. They seemed impressed.

“Hey, the overlay is gone,” remarked one woman, looking around. “Feel that?”

The others looked about, casting wizardries of their own, and found that to be the case.

“Like I said,” explained Susan, “*Dead Magic* will suppress all magic in an area. That includes decades old magic too. Now, will this ‘overlay’ of yours seep back into this space? I have no clue. But for the moment, this room, and anything about ten meters from where I was standing should be clean.”

“Could the area be widened?” asked a man.

“Sure. It’s dependent on the energy I throw into the spell. How wide is Ireland?” There was some discussion, leading to a figure of about 85,000km. “Okay, divide that by 25...” she grabbed a nearby calculator. “That’s 3,400 people I would have to drain of energy to get the whole country. All magic everywhere would fail for a minute, and then your overlay problem will be gone.”

“We’ll think about it,” said Johnny, in a tone that covered shock, revulsion, and “we won’t be thinking about it.” “As for now, you said the person to see is Bidy, right?”

“She’s one of your ‘bright powers’ I think you call them. She’s also been practicing making spears. I think she knows what’s coming and what we need to do to get an envelope for the spirit of fire.”

“Let’s go talk to her then.”

Susan, for once thinking ahead, decided not to antagonize the wizards that remained further and did not offer *Teleportal* to get to Bidy's house more quickly. Instead she meekly followed them to a bus stop and rode like everybody else. Halfway there she regretted her decision, as the bus slowly made its way through the town. Susan looked out the window, as the wizards didn't seem to want to talk on the way, and noticed people seemed more jumpy than usual. They walked a bit quicker, eyes darting about, not greeting others they saw on the streets as they usually did.

*No, these people have noticed, and they think nothing can be done. They are fearful because they don't know what's happening or that we are trying to protect them. Is keeping them ignorant of wizardry really serving in their best interest? I have to wonder.*

Having finally arrived, the group made their way to the back, where Bidy was found still making spears in her forging area.

"Oh, you girls again," she muttered, turning from her work and spying them. "Wait, what's all this?"

"Elder sister," said Johnny, "in the One's name, honor and greeting."

"You had to go and tell them, didn't you?" she snapped at Susan and Nita. She glared at them, taking in the group with a somewhat resolved expression on her face.

"Yes, we did," replied Susan. "We have all the treasures but fire, so it's time for you to take the stage. I mean, I'm perfectly happy to go beat up this Balor fellow with my strength and power alone, but these people might not trust that. So let's reassure them as we're able, huh?"

"You have no idea what you're asking."

"What is she asking?" asked Johnny, stepping up. "Obviously I'm a little behind the times here, you three have obviously spoken before this."

Bidy barked a laugh. "Spoken? Yes, I suppose what happened between us could be considered a kind of dialog." Johnny looked confused, but Bidy waved it away. "Never mind. What you're all asking for is impossible anyway. The original spear of fire is gone, and matter now is too fragile to use to make another."

"And I'm telling you, I can make the matter as indestructible as you need," countered Susan. "I wish I had an example, but- wait a second, I did *Fabricate* something of my own. The dagger!" She pulled the dagger from her leg sheath and handed it over. "I made this knife one TR sharper than a normal knife because I had no idea how tough Dementors were. It can't be dulled past that point, and even snapping the blade will make it regrow to this configuration. Go ahead, try it!"

Bidy looked skeptical, but brought the knife over to her belt sander, where normally an edge would be put on something. This time though she held it wrong, trying to blunt the edge. A few moments later, she pulled it away and was surprised to see the edge was just as sharp as it had been. She peered at it, as if doing some kind of *Magic Sense* or whatever she could do with her own powers. "I see."

"This was made sharper, but it could easily have been made tougher, instead. Combine them, and I can make you the sharpest thing in existence, that also happens to be indestructible."

"I appreciate the offer," she said, handing the knife back, "but you don't understand. Look, you said you got the sword of air, right? Can you bring it here?"

"Sparkle? Bring out the Fraggie Rock!"

"You got it boss." Sparkle made her check, not needing to worry about the energy cost at the moment, and got out the sword.

"The cat really was carrying it!" exclaimed one of the wizards.

"Look at it," said Bidy, picking it up.

Susan had to admit, the sword seemed to glow with an inner light, and even the sword she had left with the school, or the weapons she had heard Aerith's friends calling "ultimate" didn't look as solidly "there" as this sword did. She got out her secondary blade, the *Enhance Sword* and put them side by side. It hadn't been *fabricated* but Susan felt it hadn't been necessary. The thing had a wicked edge, just like her *Crystal Sword* and both felt sturdy as anything. Still, even the metal from another world seemed pale and weak next to the sword of air.

"All right, I admit there is some difference between the two materials," Susan grudgingly allowed.

"Thank you," Biddy replied smugly. "So get me some metal like that, and we can talk about forging."

*Gee, can Creation make something like that? That metal seems almost supernatural, and any iron I make with the spell will just be normal, everyday, iron.*

Johnny was looking over her shoulder, comparing the two blades. "It could be done, but finding someone powerful enough to make the spell work... that's the tricky part."

"What are you thinking?" asked another wizard.

"Timeslide. Pull some matter from a protostar, a couple of billion years ago. That's probably closest to what the original spear would have been made from."

"Could be dangerous, it gets out of control and you can kiss the Earth goodbye."

"I'm aware of the risks. Who do we know that's powerful enough?"

"My-" Nita started.

"Hold it!" Susan said at the same time. "What's this plan? You're seriously standing there, and with a straight face discussing opening a hole in time and space to billions of years ago, and then casually grabbing up some plasma from the interior of a freaking star? Just for a bit of metal that will be hammered into a spear shape?"

"Yes, exactly!" said Johnny brightly. "You can clear the overlay wherever we do it, right? That would be a big help."

"The overlay isn't the point. There's got to be a simpler solution, one that doesn't risk the entire planet being blown to smithereens. I mean, what is with wizardry around here? You can go to the moon, but in that battle with the wolf creatures, I had to do all the work. Nita just stood there like a lump. No offense, Nita."

"None taken?"

"You can't strengthen metal, but you can time travel back to just after the big bang? Your sense of scale is all wrong!"

Johnny looked thoughtful for a moment. "Okay, I think I can explain this. You're used to doing magic, just waving your hands around and something happens, right? You learn 'spells' to produce a result."

"That's correct."

"We come up with what we need, basically on the fly. We don't learn spells, we learn the *Speech*, through which we can ask reality to be a certain way. If we've asked in the right way, it happens. Even a wizard at my level probably only has memorized a dozen or so 'spells' that we use all the time. Anything else we need, we just ask for. But the asking has a cost. We can't make something from nothing, that energy has to come from somewhere. You looked at the oath?" Susan shook her head. "Then you know. Wizards are here to preserve and safeguard, at the core, energy. That means not squandering it in any form. Even if it's as simple as turning lights off when we leave the room, every bit of energy saved means the universe's death is put off that much more." *Boy, are you guys going to love compact florescent and LED lighting.* "So no, we don't do wizardry except for the big stuff that comes along, because solving problems the other way is more energy efficient. We basically are saying 'I'll solve this problem without wizardry and bank that energy I would have used otherwise against a future need.' And here we are, one of those times we need a lot of power to do what's needed, so let's make that 'withdrawal' now. You see where I'm coming from?"

"I guess I do. That's why you guys can't make food with wizardry, the energy cost would be greater than the energy gained from eating the food."

"Among other reasons, sure, that's part of it."

Susan took a deep breath, defeated. "Apart from clearing the overlay, let me know what else I can do to help."

"Well said," spoke up Sparkle. "I think you're finally getting the hang of it."

Susan chuckled. "Quiet, you. Sorry I've been a little... more like myself than usual. I'm not sure what's gotten into me."

"Never mind," said Johnny. "Nita, you were about to say something?"

"I was about to say my sister could probably do it. She can shove planets around, so a simple timeslide should be within her reach."

Susan's head whipped around to look at Nita, who for some reason looked back at her rather smugly. *Man, and I was joking about shoving the planet. What kind of rating would a person need to do something like that?*

"Let's get her here, then."

So Nita sent a message through her book of wizardry, and moments later a young slip of a girl, no more than thirteen by Susan's eyes, appeared with a bang outside the building. Her health level wasn't great, and neither was her *Spirit Energy*, both about normal for a girl her age, from what Susan could sense with *Spirit Sense*. She had a shock of red hair and was skinny, with tons of freckles, and carrying what Susan would consider an antique of a laptop. She set it down, and it unfolded legs and scurried after her. "Hey, everyone," she called, coming inside. "What's shaking?" Susan stared. "Watch out, you'll catch fish like that," the girl said to her. Susan realized she was a bit slack jawed, she expected an *older* sister, not a *younger* one.

"Susan, everyone, may I introduce my sister, Dairine?"

"Wait, what?" asked Susan. "This is who we're entrusting the fate of the planet to? How can she have the ratings needed to even consider what you guys are planning? I thought maybe a team of all the wizards in the area working together, not one young girl!"

"I'm right here, you know."

"Younger wizards are always more powerful," explained Johnny.

"More powerful than a whole group of you?"

Johnny moved his head back and forth. "Trouble is, the more people reading a spell, the more chance there is someone flubs it up. Misspeaks a word, or skips a line, or sneezes or something."

"Yeah, but with one person, there's no one to take up the slack if someone reading the spell starts having a heart attack or something. She screws it up, and it's all over!"

"Still right here."

"She can do it," Nita said, as though the words had to fight their way out of her. "If anyone can, my sister can."

"Wow, sis, that was a ringing endorsement if I ever heard one. You should write advertising jingles for Pepsi."

"And you're back to your old self," put in Sparkle. Dairine went over to pet her, saying what a pretty kitty she was. "Umm, thank you?"

"Fine," relented Susan. "I guess if you blow the place up, The Darkness can't take its energy, right? If you say she can do it, I'll believe you."

"Course I can do it," Dairine said confidently. She paused. "What exactly am I doing?"

The group explained what they wanted of her, and she nodded seriously. "Shouldn't be a problem. Could be a bit of a strain, but I'll try my best not to blow the planet up." She winked at Susan. "When do you want to make this all go down?"

"May as well get started," said Johnny. "Honored Power, can you bring what you'll need up to Castle Matrix? I have the cup there, we'll need water if things get out of hand."

"Call me Biddy, please, none of this power stuff. And yes, I guess I'll have to, won't I? Let me get my things together."

"You don't seem very enthusiastic," remarked Dairine. "Don't like making weapons or something?"

"It's not that," she explained. "As I've told Susan here, when I came to live here I had to give up most of my power. To forge something like this, well, I'll have to take that power back."

That will, sadly, destroy me.”

“Wait, destroy-destroy or just destroy-release?” asked Susan. “I mean it’ll just be your body that goes, not your consciousness, right? You can just take a new body.”

“I’m not sure,” she admitted. “I’ve never done something like this in this form before. It’s all right, whatever happens. I’ve lived here a long time. If the One now requires me back, at least it’ll be for the right reasons.”

“Your sacrifice, if that’s what it becomes, will not be unremembered by us,” said Johnny seriously.

Susan shook her head, not really understanding but unwilling to press the issue any further. *What is wrong with these people? How can banging a bit of metal into shape destroy this being? Why does a little kid have the power to open a gateway in time and space greater than anything I can do? Time Door only allows one week per Saturn rating. I don’t even want to calculate the energy I would have to throw into my rating to get even a hundred years back in time, to say nothing of billions. And she struts around like... well, me, I guess if you want to put a fine point on it. Is that how others see me? No wonder Johnny didn’t trust me at first, if I was acting like that. I’ll have to be more careful. If these treasures are so important, why were they allowed to decay like this, or be lost like the spear was lost? I mean obviously this reenactment of theirs has been done many times since the first time, right? Or do these treasures lose their spirits just that quickly? If that’s the case, what are they going to use the next time, if this ‘power’ dies because she forges a simple spear? Too many questions.*

“It’ll take a day to move everything to the castle, and get the place prepared for the whole thing,” Johnny was saying to the others. “We’ll need to put bindings on the place, so the treasures can all be there at once. Meet there in twenty four hours?”

Nods went around the group, and it started breaking up.

“Guess I’ll head home then,” said Dairine. “Make sure I have the spell I’m going to use right in my head. See you all tomorrow. Oh, you want me to bring Kit along when I come?” she asked Nita.

“Sure, he wouldn’t want to miss it. I’ll send him a message tonight, too. Thanks.”

“No problem. See everybody then!” She concentrated and vanished.

*She doesn’t seem concerned about ‘overlay,’ didn’t blow herself up, either. Maybe Nita is just a really bad wizard?*

Annie came over to where they were standing.

“Look, Johnny probably won’t apologize, but I want to. Sorry for trying to seal you up before. I just got scared because I didn’t know what you were.” *Huh, the very thing I was thinking about on the way here.* “And thanks... for my kitchen back. Trying to replace that would have raised some questions. I’m glad we didn’t have to, in the end.”

“No harm done,” she replied. “It seems to have worked out here.” She gestured to Bidy, looking over to tools and starting to make a pile of things. “And I’m serious about helping.” She called over to Bidy. “If you want to take that stuff directly to the castle, I can open a *Teleportal* and you can just step it through.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Bidy replied. “Getting it there is the easy part.”

“Okay. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“Will do.”

“In any case, if you think of anything I can do,” she said to Nita and Annie, “you know I can do a lot, so don’t hesitate to ask. Otherwise, since we have another day, I’ll just continue my own preparations.”

“That might be best. I think people are a little nervous about the whole thing. Best not to introduce otherworldly magic into the mix as well. Let them rely on what they know.”

“I guess you’re right. Want to head back? We don’t have to take the bus.”

When they were ready, Susan stepped them over to the farm again, behind the trailer she and Nita were staying in, because there probably wouldn’t be anyone around there.

“Do you want to stay up at the house?” asked Annie. “That trailer was only meant for

one.”

“I don’t mind. What do you say, want to get rid of me?” Susan asked Nita.

She shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stay out here.”

“Okay. Come in for dinner in about an hour.”

“I’ll help!” insisted Susan, but Annie pushed her away. “Relax. You’re my guest, especially now that I know exactly who you are. Save your strength for the reenactment.”

“Thanks.”

She departed with a nod.

“Now what?” asked Nita.

“We have some time, I’m going to look into further increasing my damage. If we’re going up against those drow things again, I’m going to have to hit way, way harder if I want to take them down. How many times did you hit them with *Line*, Sparkle?”

“I wasn’t exactly counting.”

“But a lot, right?”

“Yeah.”

“And I only do a third of damage with *Slash All*. She was doing full damage, and to multiple locations to each of them. And they *still* took a pounding. I need to figure out the best way to clear them out.”

“If you’re going to be looking through your own book of magic, I’d love to watch. Maybe it’ll give me some ideas for things I can do with wizardry.”

“You’re welcome to. Come on, we’ll see what I can come up with.”

The three went inside, and Susan started paging through and making some notes.

Susan paused, looking at the “B” section of her spells, on *Blind*. “Hey Sparkle, you think if I converted my *Added Effect Materia* and paired it with *Blind*, anything I hit with the sword would get the ‘status effect’ of being blind?”

“Seems reasonable to me. When the gang used it with *Chocobo Summon Materia* it sometimes gave them the *Stop* condition. And *Poison* would poison them. Why not *Blind*?”

“Why not blind, indeed.”

“I did have a concern though.”

“Oh?”

“You once said you might be able to make a charged object, with only one charge, and have it hooked to a *Materia* to do something, right?”

“No, I think our... benefactor said that.”

“Oh, maybe he doesn’t know our type of magic as well as he claims, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wouldn’t that just expend that one charge when it went off?”

“Oh.” Susan’s face fell. “That’s a fair point, actually. I guess it would have to be permanent, then, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s my thinking. Still, not that much difference, right?”

“No, you’re right. Let’s keep looking, I don’t think these drow things even have eyes to blind. I didn’t see any.”

She stopped again in the “E” section, looking at *Elemental Enchantment*. “That’s pretty nice. I could do wind, fire, and physical damage at once. Even taking a third of each, having three would mean it would average out to be about the same, right?”

“Seems reasonable.”

“Yes, note that as a possible.” She made a note on some paper and kept looking.

She landed in the “G” spells, and looked at one of the ones Silverstreak had provided for her recently. She looked it over this way and that. She made some notes. She started to chuckle. Her eyes got wide, and she made more notes. Then she burst into laughter and

started pounding the table, tears in her eyes.

“Uh, is she broken?” asked Nita, concerned. “Again.”

“Yeah, what’s going on with you now?” asked Sparkle.

Susan took a moment to compose herself, wiping her eyes. “It’s this *Giant’s Soul* spell. Take a look, make sure I’ve done this all right.”

“Giant’s *Soul*?” asked Nita.

“Basically, magically increases your effective size, making you like a giant. But the best part is, it doesn’t actually make you bigger.”

“What’s so great about that?”

“Oh, for me, everything! Let me show you these calculations I’ve made here. Now, as I’ve said before, a spell is powered by my own internal energy, right?”

“You probably said something like that along the way.”

“Okay. But Sparkle here knows a spell to allow me to ‘charge’ energy and throw more than I usually can into a spell. With me so far?” Nita nodded. “Okay, let’s say I throw, oh, 33 energy into this one spell as I cast it as part of the *Imbuing* process. That makes my total rating a 39.”

“Rating?”

“How good I am at the skill. It’s numeric for me, don’t worry about it. Anyway, this spell gives me a size increase of one third my rating, meaning I would be target size thirteen, effectively. As a note, dragons are size three. Each plus one doubles your size, so that puts me at an effective...” She turned her watch on, and as she thought, there was a small calculator function built into it. She multiplied 1.2 by 2 thirteen times. “9,830 meters tall. So, basically I would divide damage by fourteen, meaning a bomb dropped directly atop me might take me out, but not much else could. Oh, I can take fourteen damage before dying, normally, by the way. I would get a twenty six bonus to my STRength, which is a three right now by the way. A plus thirteen to my CONstitution checks, a four right now by the way. I could lift more than 600 Kg just from that alone, to say nothing of the bonus you get per size to your *lift*. With *Avatar of War* going, again providing bonuses to size and STRength, I would be doing between seven and *seventy four* damage. Twice, if I swing two swords. Dividing that by three—who even cares at that point?” She started to laugh again.

Nita and Sparkle looked at each other.

“Is she serious?”

Sparkle nodded gravely. “I’m afraid she is.”

"But how can that be possible?" asked Nita, looking over Susan's calculations. "To increase your strength by that much..."

"I admit, it depends on how strict a reading of the *Imbuing* skill you want to take. Here, take a look." She turned to the chapter on how to actually perform *Imbuing*. "See, right here. In terms of how strong an item you can make, the: 'effective Planet rating can be any value up to your present skill rating in the given Planet.' Now, some might argue that means I can't go above a six, because that's my Venus rating. But others, such as myself, would argue that as my skill rating in the planet is the energy I put into it, why shouldn't I be able to artificially raise it in this manner? After all, I'm casting the spell to do the *Imbuing*, so logically it follows that my rating would be the same if I am *Imbuing* or making a *Spell Paper* or just casting the spell as normal. I paid the extra *Background Points* to become a *Natural Magician* rather than a *Scholar of Magic*, after all, in order to do things like this. Plus it takes more XP the higher the rating, and I have to use several other spells, *Energetic Accumulation* and *Augment Skill* to do it. I learned the spells, came up with this method, why shouldn't I be able to take advantage of my naturally high energy total this way? I'm paying the XP cost for the item just like anyone else would. Make a lesser item, spend less XP. It's a trade off, and I have no problem with that. Plus the fact of the matter is it works, so the universe must agree with me, right?" She smiled widely.

Nita looked back at Sparkle. "Yes," the cat admitted. "She's broken. One might even say she was cheat character, if this were some kind of game." *I can't tell them what Silverstreak told me, privately, while she was working on stuff at the Hub. There are two things she doesn't consider in this sort of situation: The first being that the rules are slightly relaxed in her case, because she's traveling without the aid of a party. Her father, as cheaty as he was, had companions to rely on and so the rules were more closely enforced for him. "Whatever or whoever is enforcing the rules across realities will be a bit more relaxed in her case," he said. He didn't know exactly "who" was doing this enforcing, only that he could tell, somehow, being a higher order being than her. I guess maybe that's who The Darkness is trying to reach? Have to think about that some more. So if she wants to spend the XP and do the work to get an item like this, her efforts will be rewarded. I didn't think even she would think to take things this far- I should have known better.*

*The second thing is that The Darkness is within her. It knows what she's done. When she shows up on other worlds, it's going to have already thought of a plan to neutralize her as best it can. It'll take things like this item into consideration, just like it studied her father to find out how to shut down her magic as she's casting it. I have to wonder what it has in store for us here...*

*That's why I don't think those drow from before were sent by The Darkness at all. It would have known about her Slash All because it would have seen her working on it. Why send a group of enemies, even ones as sturdy as they proved to be, against someone that could hit all of them at once? No, I think we have yet to see The Darkness' working on this world. And that worries me most of all.*

Susan got out her calculations to see just how much XP and time she would need for all this. Nita watched as she plugged in variables and hit keys on the calculator. "Okay, I'll need 25 XP, which I exactly have, how about that? And if I want to do it tonight, I'll need a sixty five rating in *Imbuing* to not flub it. Ugh. Let's see, I have eighty energy, I can go negative my eight endurance, that's eighty eight. I have a seven rating in *Imbuing*, so I'll need a fifty eight total. That will leave me with 30 energy to work with. My rating in Venus is a six... hey Sparkle, can I borrow three energy? Wait, maybe a little more, I'll have to cast *Augment Skill* and *Giant's Soul* so that's another two."

"I'm not worried about one or two. You can have my energy," Sparkle sighed.

"What's all this?" Nita asked, not following it at all.

"She's cheating again," said Sparkle. "Normally creating an item with magic bound up into it takes weeks. You've felt her *Augment* magic, you used it to make the spell to wake up the vessels. She's just using it to an extreme, making sure that no matter how she rushes making this thing, she can't fail. It's one of the perks of being a *Paragon*. We get to know exactly how good we are at something, and sometimes how difficult things are to do. So we can plan out how to achieve them with a bit more precision than others can."

"Oh. But what are all these calculations she's doing?"

"Oh, this?" Susan said with scorn. "Yeah, tell me about it. Because the XP cost depends on so many variables, you almost need a spreadsheet just to figure out how much it'll cost you. Don't worry about it, this part makes sense, though if you can learn to do this, I have no idea how to explain what your rating are or whatnot. As you don't have ratings or XP or any of that sort of thing, maybe you can't learn to do this? I don't know, you can't spend XP, but items I made for my friends worked, so they were losing something. Didn't seem to hold them back, so I don't know. Anyway come on, I need to find some stuff if I'm going to do this tonight!"

And so, Susan collected various things from Annie before dinner, adding up to seventy dollars worth of stuff that she didn't mind losing. After they ate, Susan threw around vast quantities of energy and magic to shove *Giant's Soul*, (which she got a fifteen on *Scripture* and nineteen on *Theory* to read and understand so she could cast it from writings) into one of the "empty" steel balls Silverstreak had given her if she wanted to make custom "*Materia*." As the lights died away in the kitchen where she was working (Annie had wanted to observe the process, so she was working there) she had a new *Imbued* item. It was now ten PM, and Susan was grinning like an idiot. She had zero XP, close to zero energy, but still felt on top of the world.

"What a fascinating procedure," remarked Annie, who had been taking notes. Susan had said she would be glad to make a copy of her book explanation of the process, and Annie said she would want that too. But that she wanted notes on actual *Imbuing* as an example.

"Just don't rush it like she did," cautioned Sparkle. "You don't have her magic to cheat the system." She shook her head. "Bad things can happen if you mess it up. From just explosions to making a cursed item that you can't get rid of, and has the opposite working to the one you wanted."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Let's go test it!" Susan was bouncing a little in her chair as she popped the ball into her *Wizard Bracelet*, feeling a new lightness coming to her body.

"How?" asked Nita.

"Have any old stumps you want ripped up?" asked Susan. "Heavy plants moved? Old cars dragged away? Pranks pulled by putting old tractors up in the loft of your barn? Carrying heavy stuff down from the loft? Stop me at any time here..."

"There is actually an old stump I've never gotten around to winching out of the ground," Annie admitted thoughtfully. "And it's dark enough, no one would see you tearing it up."

"Let's go!" Susan popped up out of her chair.

Out in the field, Susan took a look at the tree stump, deciding where she would grip it. *Eh, even if I'm at a penalty for not having the best grip, I think my new STRength will compensate for it. Let's just see what I can do.*

She planted her feet and grabbed the stump. Not even straining, she got a thirty three on her STRength check to rip it out of the ground, and barely felt any resistance as she lifted it over her head. "Oh yeah, that's the stuff!" she cried, pumping it up and down like it was a twig rather than a stump.

"Uh, you can just put it over there," Annie said, pointing.

"You got it!" Susan went whistling over to the side of the barn, stump held high. She flipped it down, then turned back to the others. "Oh, wait!" She backed off a few steps, then shot forward, jumping straight up against the wall of the barn. She flew up four meters, with the help of her *Jumping* check of 23. "Shoryuken!" she yelled, punching the air above her.

This wasn't quite enough to get to the roof, but still was quite respectable. She landed with a thud. "I love spells that do more than one thing at a time!" she exclaimed. "And hey, this isn't even as good as I'll be when we fight Balor. I've got *Augment STRength* in one of my charms. Oh man, I can't wait now."

"Glad to hear it?" Annie didn't sound convinced. "I'm going to bed, see you girls in the morning."

"Good night!"

"I'm turning in too, you coming?" asked Nita.

"Yeah, just one or two more things. I'll be right behind you."

"Okay."

Susan looked the stump over, deciding if she wanted to spend a little more energy and get one of her swords out. *Wait, even if I punch the thing, the worst it can do is one damage to me. I divide all damage by fourteen now, remember?* She got into a martial arts stance and punched the wood, putting one energy into STRength to get an even 30 so her OTR was high enough. (Plus taking a couple of segments to aim as her skill at hitting was only a two at the moment.) She did thirty nine damage to the stump, an object with a *DC (damage capacity)* of 6\*3, 18. (Not accounting for thickness. But even doubling that it would still have been more than enough.)

It exploded into kindling.

She shook her hand out a little. "Huh. Stung a bit." She threatened to laugh again. *Oh man, I'm going to totally ROCK Mars spells now, aren't I? And Fabrication? Forget about it!*

"Are you quite finished?" asked Sparkle.

"Quite," admitted Susan. "Though I may have to put some points into *Wrestling* now. I don't have many other STRength based skills apart from jumping."

"I suppose one wouldn't hurt, what with your insane stat now. I just hope it was worth twenty five XP. That's all you've gotten here, and we're coming up to the boss battle."

"Oh, I think it was. I'm just about at the level of a whole party. I mean I'm a total tank now, and a magic user, and a healer, and with *Ally* and my *Legion*, a summoner as well. And let's not forget my companion, who has spells of her own!"

"I'm glad I factored in there somewhere."

"I do appreciate you, you know." Susan dropped to one knee and scratched behind Sparkle's ears. "We're partners, and you know this wouldn't have been possible tonight without you."

"Just so long as you remember. Now come on, we both have energy to get back."

"Yup, let's go."

The next morning, Susan woke up to find nine hours had passed, and with energy 98% returned. *An hour or so of light activity, and I'll be full again. Of course, if I'm throwing around spells to make more Papers that won't happen.*

"What's up?" she asked, looking at Nita, who was staring intently out the window.

"Oh, good morning," she replied. "There's some guy out there I've never seen before. He's just been standing there, staring at the trailer, since I got up."

"Odd. What's he-" She sprang up, not yet used to her new STRength, and stood beside Nita to take a look. He was dressed in extremely outdated clothing, and looked rather out of sorts standing there. He had on a dark green jacket with wide lapels, with two rows of three buttons going up the front. It was cut just above the belt, which was a wide leather. White pants rounded out the outfit, but they had a funny cuff at the bottom, like the man had grown overnight, and sewn a different fabric onto the ends of his pant legs rather than buy a new pair. "I see. Seems a bit old for cosplay. Some kind of historical reenactment? But that means something different around here... Want me to go chase him off?"

"Maybe you had better let me handle this," she replied. "You get dressed and we'll go up to the house for breakfast."

"Sounds good! Sparkle?"

"Here, oh master."

As Susan got dressed and had Sparkle cast *Hygiene* on her, Nita went out to see what the guy wanted. She stepped back up to the window and saw her beckoning to come out, so she locked the door and went over to him.

"Help," he muttered, almost too softly for Susan to hear him.

"What can I do for you?" she replied cheerfully. "Not to worry, my rates are low, and satisfaction is guaranteed."

"Help," he repeated again after a moment of the girls staring at him expectantly.

"Right-o. Mental then?"

"Be nice," said Nita. "That's all I could get out of him too. I don't get it."

"Morning girls!" said one of the farmhands, walking by. "Nice day, isn't it? Though I felt a bit of a chill just now. Must be a ghost around! Be careful!" He kept walking, laughing. The two stared after him, then looked back at the man.

"Help," continued to plead the man.

"It is colder here," noticed Susan, taking some steps away from the figure and then moving closer again. "You don't really think..."

"One way to find out." She passed a hand through the figure, and nodded. "Yup, he's a ghost all right. But what's he doing standing here? I thought ghosts were just recordings of things, this guy seems to have a purpose in coming here."

"Probably all the weirdness with Balor, who knows? As for why he's here now? That one I can answer for sure," said Susan with confidence. "The universe has decided to allow me one more chance at XP before the big battle. Nice of it, really, given that having none is pretty dangerous, even for me."

"Say that again?"

"I used up my XP to make this last night, you saw that," she explained, showing the *Wizard Bracelet* with the new *Imbuing*. "If I were to take a fatal blow somehow, I couldn't spend an XP to stabilize and remain alive. Or get a bonus if I need it, or retry something in combat."

"Help."

"Yes, yes, one minute there Mr. Ghost."

"O'Neill."

"Mr. O'Neill, then. So now, it has given me this ghost to help so I can get some more- Wait, is that your name?" Both girls were now focused on the ghost again.

"Help."

Susan sighed. "This is going to take forever!"

"Come on, let's go up to the house. Maybe my aunt will know something."

"Suits me. Come on Mr. Gh- Mr. O'Neill. Come on." She tried to get him to follow, but he just kind of stood there. "Oh for gosh sakes, you got here somehow, didn't you? Come on." She put *Phase* on herself and was able to pull the ghost along by the arm. "My goodness, it's a good thing the ghosts back home aren't like you. Come on, up the steps now, that's a good ghost."

They finally made it inside and Nita went looking for her aunt, who was on the phone and talking wizardry with someone. Susan poured some cereal for them both while they waited, and a little while later she came back into the room. It was now much colder, and the battery operated clocks had stopped working. The clock on the stove was barely readable, but oddly, the ghost seemed a bit more perky. He was now looking around, and Susan made a REASON check, getting a twenty two in order to figure out what was going on. That was pretty high, so she decided to try something. She turned on the lights in the room, and the toaster, and everything else electrical she could find, all which sluggishly performed if it went on at all.

The ghost, however, perked up considerably.

"Better, thank you," it said, seeming even more aware now. "Hard to think out there. Better here. Please, help me."

"Must be the energy he can draw from his environment," suggested Susan. "Anyway, how can we help you, Mr. O'Neill?"

"You must stop her. She'll kill again. All my fault. Please, find them and stop her. I think you're the only one who can."

"I'm going to need a little bit more than that."

He shook his head. "No more. Dead so long. Wandering. Have to stop her killing. They were found, I felt it. Managed to come through. Please stop her. All my fault."

"You can't give us a little more?"

The ghost pondered a moment. "Horses?"

"You want to see the horses?" asked Annie.

"No. Horses. Races. She'll kill them. Please, help."

"Horses... O'Neill... a ghost... this all sounds somehow familiar. Susan, can you get me to the library? I'd like to look something up."

"Sure..." *Hermione. But I guess they don't have the Internet.* "I've been there. Let's just hope someone isn't in the rest room this early."

"Stay here, Mr. O'Neill. We'll help you."

"Help me!"

"Yes, she just said we would," said Susan.

"I just have to see if you are who I think you are. I'll be back, okay?"

The ghost seemed to consider this, as if the concept of going away and coming back here was a bit tricky to grasp. "I understand. I'll wait here."

"Good. Susan?"

She opened a *Teleportal*, making a LUCk check (a twenty) to see if there was anyone around. There wasn't, so they stepped through and went looking in books about Ireland. Susan didn't have *Research* so she rolled it untrained, getting a nine. This at least helped Annie a little, and with Nita (who seemed better at it) also helping, they came across a local legend of an unfortunate man named Charles O'Neill, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The story fit; horses, tragedy, and a woman giving a gift that turned out later to be not exactly what it seemed.

"He's right," Annie said after reading the tale over. "If it's the same man, there is a danger, so we better hurry."

"So what are we waiting for?" asked Susan. "Let's go!"

To Save a Horse and Possibly a Man's Soul

Place: Annie's Kitchen

Time: About 10:00 in the morning

"If you girls want to help this... ghost, or whatever he is, that's fine with me," said Annie when they got back to the house. "But I have things to prepare for this evening when we get the metal here. So you're on your own."

"That's fine," replied Susan. "Just don't go without me, I would hate to miss the world blowing up, and all."

She chuckled. "It's a deal."

"So, what did you find out?" asked Sparkle.

"Turns out there is a legend of a Charles O'Neill locally. Mr. O'Neill, I'll tell you what we found out at the library, maybe it'll jog your memory, okay?" The ghost nodded. "So apparently, he was a wealthy guy a couple hundred years ago. He acquired a horse that he named Broughshane Swallow, because he owned the Broughshane Estate. Now this was as fine as horse as had ever been seen in the area, so there was a lot of excitement surrounding local races that were coming up. Now Charles here, may I call you Charles? Charles here wanted his horse to win, duh, and before the first race an old woman handed him a rosary and told him that as long as the horse wore it, boom, guaranteed win! Who would say no to that?"

"Certainly not unbelieving horse owners in the 1760s," remarked Nita.

"Precisely. Also note the false sense of security offered by a supposed holy object, a rosary. Very tricky, this odd woman, who drops out of the story immediately after. Who was she, and what was her game? Anyway, horse carried it in the race, won, Charles is overjoyed. He then repeats this success in other races. What he didn't realize was that all this winning was killing his horse! At the end of one race, having been compelled by the beads to win, poor Swallow fell over dead. The rosary disappears at the end of the story, but that's probably what Charles was talking about finding again."

The ghost nodded. "I died soon after the horse. Just couldn't live, knowing I had killed that magnificent animal."

"So you've been wondering the Earth for over two hundred years after that?" asked Nita.

Charles shook his head. "Don't know. Don't remember. Just know the beads are being used again. Have to get them, keep any more horses from dying. Seems my... duty."

"That's something I can get behind!" exclaimed Susan. She looked over to Nita.

"Eh," she grunted with a shrug. "Not a huge horse fan. But I agree, we should look into it. I'm more interested about this woman, your questions are only the tip of the iceberg. Where did she get the beads? How did she know they would cause the horse to win? What *did* cause the horse to win? Are they wizardry? Because wizardry wouldn't do something like that, normally."

"Do you have cursed objects in this world? That's what it sounds like to me. Charles, is that story right? Did you make a deal with someone for the rosary?"

"Don't remember. I do remember the woman, that much is true."

"It's not much to go on. I guess I can do some *Question* magic, maybe narrow it down a bit."

Nita laughed. "You need practice in not using magic. We don't need spells, just the newspaper from the past few days. Come on."

Susan, somewhat miffed, (and disbelieving that magic wasn't the answer to everything) followed Nita out to where they put the old newspaper. Nita pawed through it, looking for the sports section, and dragged out as many as she could find. They went back to the kitchen and smoothed them out, looking for anything relevant.

"Here you go," said Nita, reading one from the day before. "See, I figured one horse winning a lot of races would make the paper, at least a minor article. And I was right, the

horse Clara McCloud, owned by Mr. Brogan, has won his last four races.”

“And that’s newsworthy around here, is it? Must have been a slow news day.” *Wait, McCloud? Another coincidence?*

Nita glared at her levelly. “It is when the horse is coming in first by thirty seconds or more. Most races the first and second place winner are within seconds of each other. According to this, anyway. I don’t know anything about horse races. Plus, they’re apparently going to be testing the animal for steroids or other means of winning races. Including bribes to the other jockeys to throw the race.”

“So the horse won’t be racing for a while, that’s good. Maybe we can still save her.”

“If he doesn’t just choose another horse to put the rosary on.”

“Good point. If the owner was smart he would have verified the rosary worked, then switched it between horses so no one horse stood out. He would have made just as much money, betting on the horse he knew would win.”

“Maybe he only has the one horse?”

“Possible. Okay, we need to find this fellow, that’s where the rosary will be.”

“Can your magic do that?”

“Pfff, can my magic do that? It’s simply a question of which method will produce the best result. I can’t use *Descry*, either on the horse, the man, or the object, because I’ve never seen their likeness. A weakness in the series, to be sure. I guess I’ll just ask *Question* what the address is, maybe we can go from there?”

“An address shouldn’t be too many words,” agreed Sparkle. “Just don’t go overboard. We’ll need power later if you want to do any more prep work for after the spear is forged.”

“I can steal some from the horses, but I get what you’re saying. I’ll take the extra time.” Susan put the question to her magic, and got back an address. She had to ask again, for the town, which Annie said was two thousand kilometers away.

“What? We’ll never make it there! How did the ghost find us, anyway?” Susan asked herself. “I mean apart from needing to be here to let me do this mission or whatever. Still…”

“I can get us there,” said Nita, now a bit smug herself. “The overlay hasn’t come back to the kitchen, so I can just teleport us there!”

“Woah, isn’t that dangerous? What if you teleport us into a wall or something? Or right in front of someone?”

Nita shook her head with a smile. “See, that’s where our methods differ. I can ask the wizardry itself to make sure it’s an open space, where no one is nearby.”

“Interesting. Must be nice. Okay, go to it.”

Nita consulted her book, then asked Susan all kinds of weird questions about herself and Sparkle so their names could be written in the *Speech*. “I have to put you into the spell, so your name has to be right. If it’s not, the spell might change you, because it thinks you’re asking to be that thing rather than telling it you are already this thing.”

*Great! And this fiddly kind of power is being used by a twelve year old sometime tonight to drag star matter here from the distant past?* “So I guess there’s advantages and disadvantages to our individual way of doing things.”

“Seems that way. You ready?”

“Would you mind writing that name down for me in my book of magic? It sort of looks cool, all curves and things. I wouldn’t mind having it to look at later.”

“Sure.” She did. “Ready?”

“Wait, what about our friend? Can you follow us?” she asked the ghost.

He shook his head. “Unless I could possess you?”

“Ah, no, don’t think I’ll be letting you do that. Sparkle? Nita?” Both quickly indicated that would not be their first choice of things. “Sorry. We’ll be back to report on how we did.”

“I’ll know,” said the ghost.

So the wizardry took them where Nita had asked for, and they set out to the stable they saw in the distance. “That must be the place,” said Nita. “How do you want to do this? You’re the expert in ‘adventures’ after all, right?”

Susan rubbed her hands together in glee, eyes shining. *Nice to see wizardry doing something around here. But now it’s the Susan show again! Just you wait-*

“How about I just go check things out first, before you go down there and smash the place up,” suggested Sparkle. “They won’t pay attention to another cat wandering around.”

Susan’s face went through a range of emotions. Finally she put a finger up. “Good plan. We’ll just wait here, okay?”

“Super. Be back in a bit.” She took off down the hill, leaving the two girls to look the whole place over. It was a fairly standard stable, with a long driveway coming off the road, and houses could be seen on either side. There was the main building where the horses were probably kept, and a fenced in area with beaten down grass, where it looked like a class was going on. A bunch of young kids were all crowded around a horse being held by an older man, who seemed to be pointing things out to them. Moments passed.

“Would the rosary be here, though?” mused Nita, looking the place over.

“This is where my magic said we would find Brogan.”

“That’s the trouble. Would he carry it around with him? I mean, why? He’s just the owner of the horse, right? This is where he stables the horse, but that doesn’t mean his office or whatever is here. Or perhaps the horse thing is just a hobby of his, and he’s off somewhere else. He would keep it somewhere secure so someone didn’t find out about it and steal it, only bringing it out when it was time for a race.”

“I see what you’re saying. You think I should have asked where we would find the rosary directly? I figured just jump the guy and grab it, but maybe that’s not the best tactic.”

Nita looked a bit shocked, but only for a moment. She knew Susan well enough by now, after all. “I should say not! We don’t even know what he looks like. You asked your magic where we could find him, meaning right that second, right? He might have been leaving just then for all we know.”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. Maybe we... / should have thought things through a little more before leaving. You might not have noticed this about me, but I tend to just try and power through things...”

“I didn’t notice that at all!” Nita exclaimed, pretending to be shocked.

About twenty minutes passed when Sparkle came back up the hill to where the girls were waiting.

“So what’s the news?” Susan inquired.

“I saw our target,” she reported. “He was there shouting at the help. Apparently McCould isn’t doing so well, and he thinks it’s their fault. They kept trying to tell him she should be allowed to rest at least a week before her next race, he insists she race as soon as the tests are done. He left in a huff.”

“Ah, so he’ll be driving for at least a little while?”

“Unless he lives just up the street. I had an idea. Since I’ve seen him, I can use *Descry Creature* to get his location. Nita can bring us there when he stops moving around.”

Susan shook her head. “Nita was asking about that while you were gone. She said we should target the rosary, not the man. He won’t be carrying the thing around, right?”

“That depends on his personality, and how paranoid he is, I guess. That’s a good thought though.”

“I guess I’ll just ask again, and I if I get ‘it’s in a car’ or something, we’ll know he has it with him. If it’s another address, boom, we’ll go there!”

Susan got out her book of magic from the sub-space pocket (to save energy, she had been keeping it in there) and recast the *Question* spell. She also performed a quick *Dead Magic* on the area, to keep Nita from having to worry about overlay. They vanished from the hilltop and reappeared in a much busier part of the country. Both peeked around the back of the building they had appeared behind, and Susan was struck by how much this place looked like the wizard village, Hogsmeade. The buildings were close together, the streets were narrow, and there was just a sense of “old world charm” that permeated the place.

“Oh, for a really good GPS,” muttered Susan, already realizing she would never be able to navigate these streets alone.

“Come on, it can’t be too far away. And what’s a GPS?”

The girls walked back and forth, looking at side streets and hoping to come across the road they wanted, but it wasn't until a man washing windows in front of a store called out to them that they actually got directions.

"You lost, lass?" he asked.

"I'm looking for Clontarf Rd, I think it's around here?" ventured Nita.

"Ach, you've passed it! Back the way you came, cross the intersection of Convent Rd, and it'll be on your left."

"Thank you."

"Not at all, lass. Slán!"

*What the? I heard that as Irish, but understood it to mean "safety." I guess that's their goodbye? How does my weird communication ability account for cultural stuff like that? Louise didn't say anything I took as weird, and her friends never questioned what I was saying. But their phrases would have had cultural meaning to them, like what he just said. Weird.*

"Slán!" she tried to say back.

Now standing before the address they discovered it was just a normal house, squeezed in between two others.

"I repeat my earlier question," said Nita. "Now what?"

"There's the home invasion way, where we sneak around and see if we can't find the thing while *Invisible* or on the astral plane. Some might prefer the ring the doorbell way and see if we can't talk our way through it."

"And which is your preferred method?" She left the *as if I didn't know* unspoken.

"Magic, of course!" she replied brightly.

"Then the best way is probably the doorbell," she said, leaning over to ring the bell.

"And I'll take point on this one, if you don't mind?"

"Hey!"

*Ugh, this one is starting to get on the ball too. What a bother, said The Darkness. Between Luna, that stupid cat that follows you around, and now her, I'm not going to have any more fun in your head.*

"It seems I must reluctantly agree with you. And Sparkle, it's praising you for what that's-

"Hello?" said a woman as the door opened. She peeked out, almost as if she was expecting trouble, and opened the door more fully when she was it was just the two girls. "Can I help you?"

Nita seemed to get an odd look on her face, then concentrated and said, "Actually, we were hoping we could help you. Did your husband recently come into possession of a rosary? And then started winning horse races?"

*Oh right, she's probably speaking Irish. But Nita mentioned she can understand and "speak" all languages somehow through the wizard language. Neat to 'see' it in action so to speak.*

"Horse- That bastard!" She slammed a fist into the door. "He told me he wasn't going to gamble anymore, and that he was looking for a buyer for that horse!"

"You mean McCloud? No, he still owns her."

"I knew he was lying! But how do you two know all this?"

"That's a bit of a long story. Do you mind if we come in?"

The woman looked both ways down the street, thinking about it. "Oh, very well. Come in." She threw the door open and both went inside. Susan looked back at Sparkle, who made a circle motion with a paw, which she took to mean "I'll be around" and nodded. They went into the living room and sat down.

"I'm Andraste."

"I'm Nita, this is Susan."

"Hello," said Susan.

"Ah, you aren't from around here either, are you?"

"No, we're both just visiting," admitted Susan.

"But we're coming to love Ireland, both of us!" insisted Nita, elbowing her.

The woman grunted, probably thinking something about "blow-ins" but who can know her mind? "So what's this about a rosary?"

"You probably won't believe us, but this morning, a ghost came to us and said the rosary he used to win some horse races in the past had resurfaced. He asked for our help in making sure it wasn't used as he used it, resulting in the death of his prized horse. We tracked it here."

"A ghost?"

"Right."

"Asked you two, specifically?"

"Yes."

"Well, you knew about McCloud. I can't see how you would be trying to scam me, but why in the world would a ghost come to you?"

"Would you believe we both have some experience in this sort of thing?" ventured Susan.

"No, I wouldn't."

She shrugged. "It's true, though."

"The point is, your husband has been winning races with McCloud, right?"

"He's been getting money from somewhere, yes. But if you're trying to get some of it, get in line. It's already spoken for."

"We don't want your money," insisted Nita. "We just want to make sure he doesn't kill horses with that cursed rosary."

"Is it cursed then?"

"What else would you call something that brings about someone's desire, at the cost of the life of the thing bringing that desire about? When a horse carries that rosary they win a few races, sure, but then die from the exertion. The stable already knows McCloud isn't doing too well, not half an hour ago they were insisting she not be placed in any more races until she's recovered from the ones she's already won."

"Ah, now there's something I can actually verify!" Andraste grabbed the phone and a book that was next to it, looked up a number and dialed it. She then got into a spirited "discussion" with someone on the other end, who finally admitted that yes, the horse was racing and yes, she wasn't doing so hot right now.

"It seems you're telling the truth, at least about that," she snarled, slamming the phone down. "But how did you get here so fast? They said my husband just left there a few minutes ago!"

"We move fast," said Susan. "You have to, in our line of work. We knew he wouldn't give it up, so we decided to talk to you about it, instead."

"What exactly is 'your line of work?'"

"Exactly what we're doing," cut in Nita. "Making sure things that should stay out of people's hands do. Making sure the world keeps going around. Protecting people who might come up against something they wouldn't know what to do with."

Andraste regarded them. "You're just kids."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"I guess I'll believe you. He bought the safe specifically to hold the thing, if it was directly valuable he would have just sold it. And he did get the money right after he found it. But two kids worrying about this sort of thing?"

"Oh, there's people like us all over," Nita assured her. "We just take things as we find them. I mean not much danger in retrieving an item like this, is there?"

"What will happen to it?"

"We'll destroy it, probably?" Nita looked at Susan, who nodded.

"As quickly as we can. Some cursed objects are hard to destroy, but we'll find a way."

*Hey, I do still have that cask of basilisk venom in my Dimension. I bet that would do the job.* "Don't worry, it won't be used again, if that's what you're worried about."

"Wish my son was a little more proactive, like you. All right. He'll be livid, but he did lie to me about racing the horse. Even if he has only paid some of the money back, I don't want McCloud to die. You can have the rosary, but you'll have to get it out of the safe. He didn't

give me the combination.”

Susan smiled. “Not to worry Mrs. Brogan. As if a simple thing like a *safe* could keep us out. Like I said, we’re professionals.”

“If you say so. Come on, it’s up in the bedroom.”

“Why was it so urgent he win races, if you don’t mind my asking?” asked Nita on the way up to the second floor.

“Ugh, my stupid husband and his stupid schemes. His family owned several horses while he was growing up, so he grew up watching them race. When he was old enough he started betting on races, but never any serious amounts. Not until recently, anyway. Convinced he could make a fortune, he started betting all our savings... and lost it all.

“Just recently his mother died and left him their last horse. She had sold the others when she started going downhill, but couldn’t bear to part with McCloud. That’s about all she left him, most of her money went to her other kids. I thought he was going to sell her, we didn’t have the money to take care of a horse, but I guess he thought she could race. But I guess he didn’t make much that way, either. Not until this cursed thing showed up. Figures, he would find something like that.” *Must be a low LUCK.* “Now we’re broke, owe back taxes, and I find out he’s still gambling even though he said he had stopped. He’s going to get it when he gets home. Anyway, here’s the safe.”

The safe was a pretty sturdy thing, and looked like it had taken a couple of people to get up the stairs. It stood upright, about as tall as Susan herself, and had a standard combination and lever on the front.

“How did they get that thing up here?” Nita exclaimed. “It must weigh tons.”

“It wasn’t easy,” she admitted, turning away from Susan. “I thought he must have bought some gold or something, but I caught a glimpse of a rosary one time. He wouldn’t even tell me what it was for, and it’s smack in the middle of our bedroom!”

*Clever girl.* With Andraste’s attention focused on Nita as her ranting continued, Susan quickly cast *Unlock* on the safe, then twisted the handle.

“What was that flash?” asked Andraste, turning back around.

“Flash? What flash?” asked Susan.

“You’ve already got it open? How in the world-”

The three stared.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” grumped Susan.

The interior of the safe was perfectly normal. The walls were rather thick, and looking at the thickness of the door Susan thought it was truly a wonder that people without a STrength near 30 could even get something like this up a flight of stairs. She had resisted the urge to pick it up while Andraste was distracted, just to see if she could. As she peered into the darkness inside, the two woman looking over her shoulders, she knew her troubles were just beginning.

"There must be fifty rosaries in there!" exclaimed Nita, grabbing some and holding them up to the light. "How in the world are we going to tell which is the right one?"

"Just have to destroy them all, I guess," grumped Susan, pulling more out. They were of all different materials, ages, and colors, though mostly wood. *The thing is supposed to be hundreds of years old. A plastic one wouldn't even be a consideration.*

"He spent money on these?" Andraste nearly shrieked. "What's the point?"

"That's easy," answered Susan. "Keep people from finding the real one. Camouflage, as it were. If someone were to find out about the thing making his horse win the races, they might come after him for it. This makes their job harder."

"And ours," agreed Nita. "Just how far do these things need to be destroyed, anyway?"

"I guess we could just light them all on fire?" ventured Susan. "That would- is it getting colder in here?"

The three looked around, and the two girls caught sight of the ghost that was materializing near them.

"That isn't O'Neill," said Nita, taking a step back. "What's going on?"

"Burn my rosary will you?" snarled the ghost, now fully visible to the girls. "I don't think so."

"What isn't?" asked Andraste, looking wildly around, trying to see what the girls were seeing.

*Oh great, can only people with magic see it?*

The ghost was female, dressed in earlier period clothing as O'Neill but wearing a thick veil that obscured the face completely. She looked trampled, her chest caved in by hoof prints, and deep tears and damage to her clothes and "flesh." As she stared, Susan could swear she caught a glimpse of a rearing horse and perhaps a horse's scream. It was obvious how this woman had died- trampled by a horse. The ghost's hair was dark and long, and it was waving about like a thing alive, or as if blown by a strong wind from below. All in all, the figure before them radiated cold, malice, and hatred, and after appearing it turned to Andraste.

"So, you can't see me, can you darling? Guess that makes you a decent candidate."

"For what?" demanded Susan, wondering if she should just rush this thing and see if she could slam it through the wall. But it seemed insubstantial, so she wasn't sure if she could put *Phase* on or not.

The ghost cackled. "You'll see girls, you'll see." Her hair suddenly shot out, elongating like rubber, and wrapped around Andraste's arms, pinning them.

"What's going on?" she yelled, shocked to feel something happening to her but unable to tell exactly what.

"It's a ghost, we'll deal with it," Nita assured her.

"Oh, you will, will you?" The ghost laughed some more. "Good luck with that."

She vanished.

Andraste winced as if something had struck her, but then blinked and looked around. "Is she still there?"

"No, she's gone!" exclaimed Susan, looking around the room. "I don't know what just happened. Stay on your guard- hey, I didn't say the ghost was a woman." She glanced over at

Nita.

“Neither did I.”

Both looked back at Andraste.

“Sloppy,” she remarked, shaking her head. “My being near people has made me sloppy. But there’s really not much you can do, anyway.”

“Possession!” remarked Susan, eyes narrowing.

“Oh, know about that, do you?”

“And I can drive you out!” Susan proclaimed confidently. She raised her hands, about to do an unarmed attack (with *Martial Arts*) and then cast *Exorcise*.

“Not another step, girl,” said the ghost, putting her hands on Andraste’s head and chin.

“Or I’ll snap her neck, see that I don’t.”

“You wouldn’t!” said Nita, shocked.

“Oh, but I would! Now, let’s see what we can do, shall we?”

The ghost then did something rather odd. She placed a hand on her own chest, and seemed to concentrate. As Nita and Susan watched, she seemed to pull something out of Andraste’s body- a glowing, swirling ball of light.

“Is that- did you just-”

“Pulled out her soul, I did!” cackled the ghost. “Now you two are really in trouble, aren’t you? Let’s see what I get, shall we?”

“Do something!” shouted Nita.

“I have to touch her,” Susan said back. “And with my STRength, if she fights back I might hurt her body accidentally!” *I’m not used to holding back my three STRength, but if I turn my Giant’s Soul off, I’ll have no chance of holding her long enough to do the spell!*

“Yes, try explaining that one to the cops!” The ghost looked like she was enjoying this, and squeezed the soul that was in her hand.

“No!” shouted Nita, but rather than explode or fade, the soul *changed*, becoming a large shield, that the ghost put into her left hand.

“Typical,” she remarked, looking it over. “A mother would be a protector, wouldn’t she? Ah well.”

“What did she do?” screamed Nita, looking panicked.

“How should I know, this is your world!” Susan shot back.

“I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Not surprised,” put in the ghost, hefting the shield. “I’ve had hundreds of years of hanging about, waiting for that rosary to be found. You think I spent it idle? No, I pushed my limits. Saw what was possible, and learned about the very nature of the soul. Now, are you going to back off and let me keep killing horses, or do we do this the hard way?”

“Of course!” The puzzle pieces clicked for Susan. “You possess the horses, make them win by exhausting themselves.”

“What of it? Filthy creatures. I used to love them, of course, until that one spooked and killed me. Now I’ve sworn to kill them all!”

“And you’re doing that one horse at a time, through races?”

“What’s time to me? You think I have anything better to do? Plus I get to make people believe in the power of the rosary, causing even more chaos in the world!” She laughed.

“Uh...”

“That’s what I thought. Now...” She raised her right hand, pointing it at Nita. “What’s your answer? Are you leaving or what?”

“Sorry, but we can’t just leave things like this, especially with you possessing that woman.”

“Thought so. Have it your way, then.”

And a beam of energy shot out of her hand, about to strike Nita.

“No!” cried Susan, jumping in front of it to shield Nita with her body. She felt something odd as the beam passed through her, and realized while it didn’t exactly damage her body, it had done six damage to her energy.

*She didn’t just absorb that, did she?*

The beam also hit Nita, as Susan hadn't been fast enough, and cried out as beam hit her in the side and caused a large red spot to appear. She had started bleeding immediately.

Even as she felt herself rolling *Initiative*, she made a *Magic Theory* check as well, getting a fifteen. *Wait, Pluto damage would do the same thing, I bet it's like that. Crap, my armor is going to be ignored, even if I got out Avatar.*

Nita put her hands over her wound, a natural reaction for someone not used to physical combat.

"What do I do?" she pleaded, face going pale.

"Something to do with wizardry, maybe? I don't know. Get out of here if you don't think you can do anything."

Susan sprang at the ghost, hoping she could pin her down without hurting her too much, before a lucky shot killed Nita. She got a fifteen on her *Martial Arts* check, having spent four energy on COOrdination to touch the ghost. Rather than getting out of the way, the ghost raised the shield and Susan felt a pulse of power directed at her. Instead of touching the ghost as she expected, she went flying backwards, crashing into the safe that was behind her. She fell to the floor, more confused than stunned.

"Oh, what a nice power!" exclaimed the ghost. "I'll call it Bounceback."

Before Susan could rise, the ghost again shot weird energy at Nita, and so she threw up a hand and cast *Deflection*, as there was no way should could stand and move to block the attack before it hit. She spent eight energy, trying to counteract the five penalty she was at for being prone. Didn't help, she only got an eleven. Silently cursing, she spent her *Retry* card, number 55, and this time put max energy in. She got a twenty two, which beat the twenty the ghost had gotten.

What she had failed to realize, in her haste, was that *Deflection* "works on any attack that would allow a parry or block with a shield." As she had just reminded herself, *Spirit* attacks "ignore armor and shields." So the attack passed straight through, hitting Nita again in the chest, and her eyes widened in shock as she was blasted backwards. Her shirt blossomed with blood, and she fell to the ground, dying.

"NO!" shouted Susan, reaching for her. *She can't spend XP to stabilize!*

The ghost was laughing in triumph. "Now for you!"

Susan made her *Gymnastics* check to stand in a single action, getting a sixteen. She spent another four energy to reduce her *Reactive Delay* by two, as she didn't have XP to spend for an extra action.

*Have to get the knife into her!* she thought quickly. *Then think of some way to take this ghost out without hurting the woman!*

*Or, put in The Darkness, you could spend your Mutiny card to not do that. I mean if she's not dead, she'll be fine for the few seconds it'll take you to finish off this woman, right? That's four XP, nearly a whole adventure's worth. I mean think it through.*

Susan was tempted.

For a split second, not even measurable with the precision of a *Paragon* counting time in segments, she thought The Darkness might be right. *I mean, with more XP I get better, right? Isn't it almost my duty to get as strong as I can to fight The Darkness off of other worlds? What's one life compared to-*

*What am I thinking? No!*

Susan made a RESolve check, getting a twenty two to fight off the temptation to give in to what The Darkness had suggested. She drew her knife.

*Pity.*

"Going to fight me with that tiny knife?" the ghost said, laughing. "Bring it on!" She raised the shield again, but blasted Susan for good measure in the meantime. Susan took the

hit, wincing more at the loss of nine energy than the minor damage she had taken. She didn't want to delay knifing Nita even a single segment if she could help it.

*At least the house isn't getting torn up from those energy blasts. It's pure spiritual energy.*

She and the ghost went at the same time, but again Susan ignored the damage and lunged for Nita, thinking she was about to get blasted again. But before she could move, the door opened and a young boy was standing there, looking confused. He started to say "Mom, what's going on?" but didn't get past "Mom" as he saw Nita lying there in a pool of her own blood.

He screamed.

"Ah, another soul!" chortled the ghost, making a grab for him instead of energy blasting Susan again. "Wonderful!"

The boy didn't even dodge as his mother, even holding a weird shield, stuck her hand out and made a grabbing motion. Perhaps he thought she was trying to grab him up to protect him from the young woman holding the knife? Who had just stabbed the other girl in the room? After all, that was the only weapon he saw, energy blasts being in the realm of stories and movies for the unlucky child. He might have even rushed to his "mothers" defense, and thought it "so cool" that she could throw energy blasts of her own. What son wouldn't?

But we can't know his mind, which went blank as his soul was ripped out of his body and he collapsed in a heap onto the floor.

Susan missed all of this, she was busy stabbing her friend in the leg. This was partially because of the twenty one she rolled on LUCk to not kill her friend, who was two away from *Gone* in the body. As Susan hadn't bothered to "hold back," her entire STRength of 29 was going to be used to calculate damage, as it was a knife first and foremost. It had to do some damage to enter the body and only *then* did the healing effect trigger. If Susan had accidentally killed her friend before that healing took place, well, her face would have been red, let me tell you. Usually this isn't a concern, because Susan's STRength was so low in the past, all she could do is one or two damage with the thing.

Not so much anymore.

As it was, she did thirty seven damage to the leg, which seems a bit absurd for such a tiny blade to do, and basically tore through it. *Whoops*. However, the healing properties of the knife immediately kicked in, and Susan left the knife in her leg so it could heal her continuously.

"Okay, didn't expect that," remarked the ghost. "You secretly wanted her dead or something and saw your chance?"

"Shut. Up." Susan angrily growled. "I will take you down."

"Not doing so great so far." The ghost concentrated, and the boy's soul turned into a sai in her hand, which she glanced disdainfully at. "Guess I shouldn't have expected very much."

*All right, I didn't want Nita to get hit with this, but as she's already down I guess I'll just use it. Should have done it from the beginning and just apologized after. But I wanted to give her the chance to contribute something rather than just doing what I always do and just taking care of stuff. Learned my lesson there.*

Susan cast *Hypnotic Field* using her maximum energy, taking the minus seven for casting it instantly. She got a twenty three, and delayed seven segments after the spell went off. She figured it was over, as the ghost was looking around at the lights now darting about the room, and went to go touch her and do an *Exorcise*.

"Pretty," said the ghost, swinging the Sai and forcing her to jump back out of the way.

"What? How?" Susan managed, dropping the spell which wasn't doing her any good at the moment.

"Did you think they would distract me, or something?"

"Fine, you may have a decent RESolve but I bet you don't have a decent STRength.

*Immobilize!*"

However, even throwing eight energy into it, the ghost busted out quite easily.

"Don't be so sure."

"Oh come on!"

The ghost laughed again, and tried to trigger the special power within the knife. That failed with a very low result, and she "tisked."

She tried again as Susan decided to just take whatever the ghost threw at her, and put the full time into casting this time. *She isn't going after Nita, anyway, or the kid, so they should be safe.*

This time the sai's blade shot forward, as the ghost activated the power associated with it. This poked Susan in the leg, as the ghost wasn't exactly aiming the thing, not knowing what it was going to do.

"I guess that could be useful."

It retracted as Susan finished casting, getting a twenty this time on *Immobilize*. The ghost struggled to get free, but this time couldn't manage it.

"Ah ha! Got you!" said Susan, though the ghost didn't seem concerned.

"Oh really?" It went *Insubstantial*. The spell, having nothing to hold onto, dropped automatically.

"Oh, you're really starting to get on my nerves," muttered Susan.

"But you can't do anything to me because you'll hurt my host," taunted the ghost. "Ha ha!"

"Oh, it may come to that." *Didn't realize how much I depended on Sparkle's Acceleration during my fights. Or just having her around, I know it's only been fifteen seconds but where are you Sparkle? Come and help your master! All right, I'll try Field again, but this time, a little differently.*

Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, getting a 12. That meant on her next action she could spend 22, which she planned on doing. *That'll leave me with 24 energy, enough to try something else if even that doesn't work.*

At the same time, the ghost became solid again, knowing it couldn't hurt Susan as it was. Susan started casting.

"Again?" the ghost whined. "Can't you do anything else but that? How boring." The ghost made a called shot to her body, trying to run her through with the extending sai, but of course her *Gaint's Soul* took that without a scratch.

"Something funny here," she remarked. "You seemed a lot more afraid of my *Spirit Attack*. I wonder." She looked down at the sai.

"*Hypnotic Field*," cast Susan, getting a thirty nine this time on the check.

The ghost finally got caught in it, going slack.

"Man," breathed Susan, relieved. "That was some bullcrap. What the heck let her pull *souls* out like that?" She went over to examine the knife and shield, now held slack on the ghost's hands. "I wonder if that shiny ball of light is what my soul looked like, when I used that spell to go into Tom. Imagine, turning them into weapons! Wild!"

Nita started stirring, but as soon as she opened her eyes she got caught by the *Field* and went comatose again. Susan pulled the knife out and put it back in the sheath. She felt around Nita's chest to make sure all her wounds were gone, and they seemed to be.

*And is that the only reason?* asked The Darkness.

Yes.

*Ah, just checking. Interesting, you had a bit of trouble with that person that was possessed, didn't you? Guess you didn't want to hurt the host, huh?*

*No, I didn't. Wonder if the ghosts back home could learn to possess and work with the soul and shoot energy blasts like that? I suppose none have ever tried.*

*I don't know, that ghost seemed different somehow, don't you think? Like it was turning into a demon, or something?*

*Maybe, I don't have much experience with demons.*

*Still, think I'll keep this in mind.*

*What do you mean, keep it in mind?*

*Hello?*

*Hey, I'm talking to- oh forget it, I have a job to do.*

Susan went down to their garage and found some gas, then looked around for a metal bucket or basket. She found one, tossed the rosaries inside, and doused them from the can. She also found Sparkle, and told her she missed a great combat.

"Combat? With who?"

"A ghost. Go see for yourself, but don't go in the room, it's locked down. She had some energy to spend, too, I had to try several times to get something to stick. Usually I have your buffs going, seems I've relied on them maybe a bit too much."

"Oh, so you won't want them anymore, so you can start relying on your own strength?"

"Don't be hasty, I didn't say that!"

*Now, to burn first or to Exorcise first, that is the question. I don't know what the spirit vanishing from her will do, if this object is really what ties her to this plane. I guess Exorcise it is.*

Susan easily got the ghost out of Andraste, as neither could make resistance checks at the moment, and the instant she was out Susan did a *Combust* on the whole pile of rosaries. It went up quickly. The two souls zipped back inside the bodies the instant the ghost was forced out, and Susan watched as it burned away along with the wooden beads.

"Now what do I do with you two?" she asked herself, staring at the two family members. "Really don't want to answer any... uncomfortable questions. Guess I'll just let the spell drop after I leave." Susan considered the safe a moment, then made a decision. She found the guy's checkbook in a drawer in the room and looked it over. "Ugh, six hundred bucks? Oh well, I haven't spent any of my thousand this 'month' anyway. She reached into her *Pocket Dimension* for some cash, cast a quick *Precious Conversion* on it from writings to make sure it was the same kind of money as was used around here, and hefted the safe easily onto one shoulder.

"Look, tell your husband what you learned, not that he'll believe you," she said to the zoned out Andraste. "I wish I could leave you some proof, but honestly the less physical evidence about this kind of thing, the better, I think. His safe will be gone, that should be proof enough. Good luck, I hope you get out of debt. Maybe you could write a story about, I don't know, two brothers or something. They ride around the country, hunting ghosts and stuff, and everybody wants to ship them. Oh, you don't know what that means... never mind. Call it... Supernatural, or something. Whatever. Don't make it two girls, too close to reality. See you!"

She then waved a hand, picked up Nita with *Telekinesis*, marched the safe downstairs, opened a *Teleportal* back to the farm, and gratefully stepped through. *So much for having energy to spend on getting more stuff ready today!*

With no one around and Nita still somewhat out of it, Susan put the safe down and tapped the watch to call Silverstreak. She was connected to the Hub.

"What can I do for you, Susan?" asked the agent.

"Just a quick question. Can this watch be set to give me reminders?"

"Why sure! Just go into the calendar function, there's all sorts of triggers. You can set one there and it'll vibrate and tell you any message you want when the trigger goes off."

"That's fantastic! Thanks a lot!"

"Sure thing! If you'd like a manual, we can give you one when you come back next."

"That would help. Thanks."

"What do you want to remember? I do have a photographic memory," said Sparkle.

"Saving," Susan said with disgust, fiddling with the watch. "A friend almost died, and I

*once again* forgot to save! What am I making all these *Spell Papers* for anyway? I suppose once it's a habit I can turn the reminder off. But for now, once an hour, maybe? Or maybe there's a trigger for 'heading into danger' or something. I mean yes, I didn't expect ghosts to pop up and attack, but really I should have, given who I am and what it means to be me."

"Ah. I see why the group had a designated saver. Of course, their save points were physical things, you could see them."

"E-yup."

That done, Susan had one more thing to take care of. "Hey, you want a safe?" she asked Annie, coming back into the kitchen and plopping it down. "I have my *Dimension* so..."

"Where did you get that?"

"Funny story!"

Time is All in the Past

Place: Anne's kitchen

Time: Just after lunch

So Susan told the story of how the ghost had been defeated, and why Annie now had a safe in her entryway, awaiting a decision as to what to do with it.

"And what extreme feat will you be performing this afternoon, then?" Annie asked, when the dishes were cleared away.

"Hopefully resting," pleaded Susan. "I used nearly all of my energy trying various things to take that ghost down. I've got my XP, I'm satisfied to let you guys forge the spear so I can take the stage again tomorrow against Balor, i.e. The Darkness."

"Yes," agreed Nita. "Nearly getting killed once today is one more time than I wanted to be nearly killed today. Or any day, to be quite honest about the whole almost dying situation."

"I still don't understand what that ghost was," said Annie, shaking her head. "No ghost I've ever heard of does anything remotely like that."

"What you have to understand," said Sparkle, "is the *Paragon* nature. We rise to a certain challenge, so our next challenge must be that much greater. So it goes, even here. If he hadn't been here, I doubt any of that would have happened."

"But then that haunted rosary would have continued circulating!"

"Maybe, maybe not. We needed some McGuffin for our quest, after all. Seems doubly appropriate, being in Ireland now."

"Okay, am I understanding this?" put in Nita. "You're saying that the world just sort of came up with something for you to do out of the blue? If you hadn't been here, the rosary might not even have existed?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Nita looked between the two travelers. "And you accept this?"

"Do you 'accept' gravity?" asked Susan. "It's how I work, I can't help but to accept it. Unless I want to give up developing in any meaningful way."

"Huh. What a way to live."

"I'll take it. Anyway, you want this safe or not?"

"You really didn't steal it?"

"No! I'm not going to steal something from people that badly off. They needed the money more than they needed this safe. With the rosary gone, I mean."

"I'll ask the help, see if any of them need a safe." She went to open the door to the outside.

"Okay. I suppose if they wanted to leave a truck somewhere I could pop it in when they weren't looking."

"I'll get whoever wants it to move it. Please don't go lifting that thing where someone can see you."

"Spoilsport," she muttered.

"We've got about five hours until we leave for castle matrix," said Nita. "Do you think we could go over those skills, like *Magic Sense* again? And with my partner as well? I think Kit would love to hear about them."

"I think that would count as light activity!" Susan replied brightly. "But I have to ask- are you sure there isn't some weapon you should be working on? Or reviewing spells or something? I know that Johnny guy said you didn't really work from spells, but tomorrow we go into battle. Or are you not coming?"

"I have wizardry, it'll be fine. Won't be overlay where we're going."

Susan shrugged. "Whatever you want, then."

So the two *Paragon* people went over the skills Susan had picked up, from *Magic Sense* to *Spirit Sense*. That took the bulk of the afternoon, with Kit nodding a lot and referring to his wizard manual during the whole thing.

"What you've been learning has made the book update itself," he explained to Nita.

"These techniques are under the 'provisional tasks' section. Other wizards have already been trying them out and making more notes. Getting as much information as we can about these techniques from other worlds, while you're here, is going to be a big help. Maybe someday all wizards will be able to make use of them."

"Glad to do it." *And if my skills can help wizards here be safe, that's like me standing by their side, even after I'm gone. Neat.*

Finally the time was right, and Annie drove them over to the castle.

"Thanks for the lift," said Susan gratefully. "I only recovered half my energy this afternoon, so while I could have opened a *Teleportal*, I'd rather save it for later."

"You could have taken some from the horses again," said Nita.

"True, but it should be fine." She held up her watch. "This time I'll remember to save, so anything goes wrong, I can just come back to before we went inside and do things differently."

"Ah."

The castle was as the girls remembered it, and Johnny led them inside and into the main hall, which had been cleared for the occasion. In the center of the floor was something that looked suspiciously like the sort of circle that showed up when Susan did magic. She stared at it.

"What do you think?" asked Johnny, picking up a brush and going back to work.

"I think your wizardry doesn't make any sense," Susan said after a moment. "You're speaking the spell, right? All your magic is talking reality into being a certain way. Not writing it."

Johnny smiled up at her. "What, you never played on the beach, made a channel for water for fill up and flow around?"

*Oh.*

"Anyway, this is what I'll be reading. Don't want to fumble with any paper or anything in the middle of all this."

*Okay, that much at least makes sense.*

He turned back to work, seeming to energize parts of the circle he was creating with a wand, that glowed and flashed when he pressed it down into the wet paint.

*Or maybe he's just flash drying the paint?*

Nita's sister came in, and looked the diagram over.

"Look, would you like to be made better at wizardry for the duration?" Susan asked her. "I can spare some energy for that, if it means this all works out."

Her eyes widened, and she scoffed. "Me? *Better* at wizardry? You don't even know who you're talking to. Come on, Spot." Her computer followed after her as she went over to talk to someone.

*The nerve of that girl!*

"Reminds me of someone," said Sparkle, looking over at her.

"Don't you dare say me. I'm nothing like that girl!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much. She's about to do something no other wizard, or even us, would be able to do. She knows it, just like most of the time you can do stuff no one else can do. How is she not like you?"

"I- She- There's- I'm much taller, for a start!" Susan sputtered.

"Yes. Taller." *But I think, back to back, your egos might be not an inch different.*

"We'll need the sword," said Johnny, coming over to her after Bidy came in with the block of metal she was going to have the molten matter poured into. He looked down at Sparkle. "And, uh, your name, if you're going to be part of the spell working."

"Not so sure that's a good idea," said Sparkle. "I can do wizardry of your type, yes, even be temporarily better at it than even you. But if something gets out of hand, I wouldn't know enough to do something on the fly." She got the sword out of her sub-space pocket. "If someone else wants to try picking it up, they're welcome to it."

Kit seemed entranced by it, and as he was nearest he bent down to pick it up. Unlike

with Susan or Nita he managed it easily, and volunteered to look after it for the duration.

"Fine with me," said Johnny. "Come put your name down. And if you can wipe out the overlay in this area?" he asked Susan.

"Sure thing."

After that, there was some last minute shuffling, checking of work, and getting into position. The three treasures were there, ready to lend power to the effort. There were some wizards Susan had seen before, at the "lynching," and it seemed even the boy they had seen at the chicken place was there, too. He had been quite surprised to see them as well, and Nita had blushed quite furiously when he stopped over to talk. When Susan asked her what was up though, she found she couldn't explain why.

"I just got the image in my head of kissing him, that's all."

"Oh, is that all?" Susan asked.

"I haven't though," she continued, a challenge in her voice. "We've not talked since we saw him that second time."

"I know, you've been running around with me this whole time. Guess I have to apologize, if I took you away from *that*."

"I don't even know why I thought- can we just drop it?"

"Sure, sure. Consider your kissing dark and mysterious local boys dropped."

*Wait a second. I'm changing these people's history by being here, aren't I? So that would mean they got "echoes" too, right? Dang, I hope hanging out with me hasn't cost her a future husband or something. Back home we only noticed after years, but that doesn't mean my actions here haven't changed the events here majorly enough to be noticed. I mean them kissing might be huge, if I really did mess that up...*

Susan watched, conscious of her *Time Anchor* outside and thinking about the balance between not changing people's destinies but still getting the job done on each world. *But would I even be able to trigger it? If this goes wrong, I doubt even Acceleration would let me act quickly enough. I suppose if I hold my action, technically I could act at any time. Or spend an XP for an extra action, that technically goes a split second before the mess up, retroactively. But if I get blown up by a sun from a billion years ago... oh well, they seem confident. Dairine does anyway.*

Those inside the circle began their work. First Johnny spoke a bunch of protections into existence, making sure the energies they were about to call didn't get out of hand. Susan's senses were buzzing as he spoke walls of force into being. She watched Nita place a hand out and go no further, and she nodded satisfied.

Then Dairine started to speak. She spoke for some time, and Susan gave a start as the inside of the spell circle suddenly lit from within, and seemed to be a proto-universe inside. While most looked stressed, tense, or just plain terrified, Dairine went swiftly to work, seemingly unconcerned. She went about the task of zooming into and rejecting many of the stars that were nearby. When she found one she wanted, though they all looked the same to her so she didn't know how Dairine could tell, the entire thing blazed as they seemed to move inside it. Nita and the others flinched as the flames erupted around them, but seemed to realize their foolishness. Then they seemed to jump again, though it was hard for Susan to follow the action with all the light being thrown around in there.

*In fact, forget about "don't look directly at the sun," they're actually inside one right now. Or some kind of simulation, at least. They must have somehow damped the light waaaay down or something. Otherwise they couldn't see anything at all, ever again. In fact even me seeing them clearly is a wonder.*

Whatever was happening inside seemed to be resolved, and Dairine sort of pointed at the mold Bidy had brought in, and seemed satisfied with what was happening. She held it a few seconds more, then seemed to make no movement at all, despite the light of the star going away and staggering to the side.

*Did she do it? Should I trigger the-*

But even as she looked, the mold was full of *something* molten, throwing a greater light, if that was even possible, across the tired faces of the people around the circle. Susan

shook her head. *All that effort for a bit of metal, even if it was from billions of years ago. They really need to take better care of these so called 'treasures' if that's what is required to make new ones. I mean these reenactment things, this is the second one Nita's been in, right? And she's not even eighteen. They must happen all the freaking time. So how do wizards here let the things they need to do reenactments with get lost or busted?*

Susan let the *Time Anchor* go as Nita rushed to her sister's side. She mumbled something, then passed out in her arms.

"Is she okay?" she asked, tapping her pant leg where the knife was strapped.

Nita nodded. "Just wiped out. Good thing it wasn't a month from now, she might not have been able to do it."

*Okay, then who would have? Would the world have burned for lack of one little girl's strength?*

*Now, now, chided The Darkness. Aren't you one little girl? Aren't you trying to save this world from burning?*

*What's that? Sentimentality?*

*Humph. If you watched an ant wrestle a bit of food across a driveway alone, wouldn't you acknowledge the ant's determination and success? Even I can recognize an outstanding achievement from one of you little beings. Despite the relative ease I could have done the same.*

*I see.*

"I see," she echoed to Nita. "Then I guess she did her part well."

"That she did," said Bidy sadly, looking at the metal. Susan had to admit, it did seem different than what she would have expected a puddle of hot metal to look like. Almost as if the mold it was resting in was insufficient to the task of containing such a prize. The metal inside nearly shined right through it, if such a thing were possible.

*Probably just a trick of the light.*

Bidy went on. "Now it seems my part in all this begins..."

Johnny offered rooms to anyone that wanted to stay the night, and several of the wizards there accepted. Most that were in the circle could hardly stay on their feet, and went to find places to sleep before they too fell over. Dairine was gently laid somewhere, but Susan wanted to see how Bidy went about forging this spear and offered her services.

"You could wash off the spell diagram for me," Johnny said to her, pointing to a nearby sponge and bucket.

"You got it," she said with a wink, snapping her fingers at Sparkle.

"Right boss," said Sparkle, casting *Hygiene* on the floor and cleaning it instantly.

"Oh. Huh. Okay... Uh, what else could you do..." He looked around.

"The forge area is actually a little ways away from here," said Bidy. "If you go down there, can you open one of those holes in the air so we could just pass it through? I would hate to spill any of this, or get anyone burned."

"Sure thing!"

So she did. Taking extra time and opening a *Teleportal*, then using *Telekinesis* to lift the mold and gently float it over to the other side.

"Safer this way," she explained. "Where do you want it?"

Bidy told her were to set it down, and Susan closed both spells down. She thought for a moment, then slid her *Wizard Bracelet* down her arm and held it up. Bidy blinked at it.

"You're really some bright power?" Susan asked, eyes narrowed. "I can trust you with this, that I'll get it back?"

"Yeah?"

"She really is?" she asked Johnny.

"She could be nothing else," he agreed.

Susan sighed with resignation. "Fine. Here, put it on."

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

"Okay, but seriously, why?" She reached for it, but Susan didn't let it go.

"If you make off with this, it doesn't matter where on this planet or any other you go. I will hunt you down and I will end you. Are we clear? I've beaten you once, you know I can do it. I will be far, far scarier if this is not returned to my hand at the end of your work."

"What is this?"

"Just take it before I change my mind."

Biddy slipped it on. "Okay, I feel a little different I guess."

"Pick up something heavy. That anvil there. No, use one hand. Wait, you're right handed? Use your left."

"I can't pick up this heavy thing with just my-" Biddy easily hefted the anvil that was sitting there. "Oh kay."

"Forging requires great STrength, right? Well, maybe that will help."

"Thanks," she said, waving the anvil about as if it was paper instead of iron. "I can see why you want it back."

*Not just that, you could Mimic, hit us all, you're luckier-*

Biddy was looking at her cross eyed. "What does your having ten *Lethal* and four *Gone* mean?"

"Just get to work! I'm renting you that by the hour!"

"Okay, just asking."

*Wow, this world really is turning you soft!*

*Quiet, you. If you saw an ant about to struggle with some heavy thing across an entire driveway, wouldn't you want to help by putting the thing it was about to carry nearer the anthill?*

*Touché. You can't do this for them, so you're offering the next best thing?*

*Yup. In any case, Susan eyes gleamed. Wouldn't you say giving up my bracelet, full of so much XP-y goodness, especially when we could be attacked any time, was somewhat of a Sacrifice? I mean she could run off with it, despite my warnings.*

*Oh, you beast! Are you going to-*

*I declare the use of card 26, Sacrifice.*

The card disappeared from Susan's character sheet, and five XP were added to her total. She got the sheet out. "Tada!"

*That actually worked? Honestly, you're such a cheat.*

*Somebody liked it, for it to work even that much.*

Susan got the distinct impression that if The Darkness had a head, it would be shaking in disgust as his presence faded from her awareness. It also seemed... amused? *Weird.*

Biddy worked as well as if she had *Augment Skill* on herself, which Susan silently congratulated herself on not offering. *Yes, fillies and gentle-colts. She can be taught! I can see where being offered magic to make you better at something might be construed as me having no confidence in the skills of the person I'm making the offer to. I just see my magic as a natural extension of my will, something there to be used. If you can make yourself better, why not do it? If you can use magic to clean a floor, why not do it? Same thing, right? Perhaps a symptom of living in that castle for all those years, where everything was done by magic. But just as likely it's my personality, and being insensitive.*

*I think, just maybe, I have to start putting my faith in others a little bit, and let them do what they can. It's a lesson I learned years ago with my friends, but all that seems so long ago now, I could use the reminder.*

But still, Susan was worried. She could feel the *Spirit Energy* being given off by everyone in that room, thanks to *Spirit Sense*. And Biddy's was steadily being drained.

*No, not drained. If it was gone, I could give it back with Energy Gift or having her eat some cake and take a nap. No, it's more like her maximum energy is being lowered... and if it's seeping into the spear to give it power, there's nothing I can do to stop it, or help her afterwards.*

“Nothing more I can do around here, I guess.” Susan proclaimed. “I have my own energy to get back, I’m going up to find somewhere to sleep. Don’t let her run off or anything!” Johnny nodded, and both travelers went to find a bed.

The forging continued.

Susan came awake, the familiar shimmer of Sparkle's *Awaken* spell lingering around her, then vanishing.

"There's a lot of activity," she said, concerned. "And something's wrong, I feel it."

"Better have a look, then," Susan remarked as she climbed out of bed and threw her clothes on. A quick *Hygene* spell later and she went to look for something to eat, and to see what the commotion was about.

It was late morning, and it seemed the troops were being gathered for battle, as wizards of every description were lounging around in various rooms of the castle. She nodded politely to them, in search of Johnny or Biddy, who she hoped was still alive. She found Johnny.

He was carrying the completed spear, which like the sword seemed more solidly "real" than the surroundings. She had to admit, it looked like a formidable weapon, and she asked to hold it. Johnny looked at her for a second, seeming to weigh the request, but handed it over. Susan made a few untrained swings, feeling the balance of it in her hands, then stared at the blade which seemed to be looking at her.

*I could make use of you, there is much fire within,* she heard, not unlike hearing the voice of The Darkness inside her. *I could even burn out that evil within you, though it would change you to do it.*

*Don't let it,* cautioned The Darkness.

*Oh, scared?*

*No, get the full story first. She's not from around here, and she's leaving.* That last was not addressed to her, but the spear. It responded.

*That is regrettable. I suppose the boy will have to do. Hand me back.*

Susan obeyed, not putting up a fuss for once.

*What was that all about?*

*Once you accepted it, you and the spear would be bonded forever. You would have been stuck here, as taking all the fire of Ireland away... might have been a bad idea.*

*Are you looking out for my best interests?* Susan was shocked.

*No, I'm looking out for mine. I want to corrupt you, remember? Can't do that if you're not on the move, making choices and screwing up everything, everywhere you go.*

*Hey, I've done pretty good so far I think.*

*Oh really? Where's your bracelet? You know, sweet bit of magic you Sacrificed for the duration?*

"Where *is* my bracelet?" she asked Johnny sternly.

"Right. Here you go." He dug it out of a pocket and handed it over. "I hope you don't mind, I tried it out. Didn't seem to work for me."

"What do you-" Susan's blood ran cold. Looking the *Wizard Bracelet* over, two of the *Materia* were missing. "Why are there *Materia* missing?" she nearly screamed, just barely holding back her temper.

The Darkness was too busy laughing hysterically to make any sense or taunt her, which was just infuriating her more.

And a small voice in her head started kicking the rest of her, if this was because of that cleverness with the *Sacrifice* card, she was really going to be pissed.

*It is, isn't it? I was too clever for my own good.*

The laughter continued.

"What's missing?" he looked at it.

"These! The tiny bits of power I worked hard at making and poured my XP into. The bracelet is worthless, it's just to carry these around. Two are gone! Where are they?!"

Johnny shook his head. "I don't know, after the ensoulment Biddy collapsed. I took it off her after she was carried inside. No one would have known to steal them, they wouldn't have known it was the beads, not the bracelet, that was valuable."

"Where is she? I'll kill her!"

Johnny sighed. "No need. She's already dead."

"I- what? She really died?"

"She really did. Come on, maybe they just fell out, we'll go look."

"Show me the body first," Susan demanded.

"This way."

The two walked through the castle to a small room, where he got out a key and unlocked the door. "We were going to have a ceremony and bury her ourselves before we left," he explained. "Didn't want any kids wandering in here by accident."

He pushed the door open and flipped a light on as they came into the room.

The bed was empty.

"That's funny," he remarked. "I have the only key, and it was still locked."

"Are you *sure* she was dead?" Susan asked, ice in her voice.

"We had a doctor check her over. She was dead, I swear!"

"Do dead bodies get up out of bed around here?" Susan indicated the covers, which had been thrown back. They made a triangle as if someone had tossed just enough of them off to swing their legs to the floor, something most people wouldn't even be conscious of. *If she had just vanished, the covers would be undisturbed. If she was taken, the covers would be totally messed up. This looks like someone got up from here, meaning she's still alive.*

"I really don't understand," Johnny insisted, checking the closet that was in the room uselessly. He looked under the bed as well, looking helpless.

"Oh, she's a bright power, you said. Oh, she's a good guy, you said. Now she's stolen my two most valuable *Materia* and cut my fighting power back down to near zero!" She got her book out, slamming it down on the bed and turning to the *Question* spell. "I'll just track her down myself. You go see if she's around here someplace. Maybe this is all just a big misunderstanding."

But even she didn't believe it.

Susan asked her magic "Where is my *Giant's Soul Imbued* object?" and screamed in frustration when the answer came back.

*Unknown.*

Nita ran into the room. "What's going on? Are you hurt? What?"

"She took it somewhere," growled Susan. "She stole my *Giant's Soul* and *Slash-All*, though for the life of me I can't imagine why the latter, and left. She *faked her own death* and then stole my stuff, to be completely accurate."

"No need to yell about it."

"No need to yell? That's our whole strategy! Mine, at least. I made that item specifically to protect you all in the upcoming battle. And your supposed 'bright power' went and stole it! That doesn't seem a bit fishy to you?"

"There must be some explanation..."

"Yeah, she decided the opportunity was too good to pass up, and made her move. See if I ever trust again."

"But she made the spear, she couldn't be bad! She wanted us to fight Balor. I don't get it. One of the Powers wouldn't act like this, they wouldn't!"

"So you say. So where's the body, huh? Two of my *Materia* just happened to fall off, and for some bizarre reason someone stole her dead body? Forget it for now, I need to go back to the farm, get more energy. I can make a temporary replacement for both, I know the spells after all, but I'll want extra energy for it. I'll deal with this so called 'power' after the

battle.”

So Susan *Teleported* back to the farm, and gathered energy from the animals that would let her touch them. She then got out two “empty” *Materia* and used *Spell Symbol* to burn the replacement spells into them. No substitute for having the real thing, but good enough for a single use. She then stepped back through, having not closed the *Teleportal* behind her.

“I don’t suppose she’s been found in the meantime?” she asked, when she found the others again.

They all shook their heads.

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.”

There were five hundred wizards, give or take, in the main hall by eight o’clock that night. Susan hadn’t been idle. To those carrying actual weapons, swords and the like, she gave a *Spell Paper* of *Avatar*. The woman with the enormous ax seemed especially pleased when she heard what it would do. She also remarked her Russian was excellent. Susan let that go, she didn’t have a half hour. *Seems they’re coming from all over, guess that’s good, right?*

To those with no weapons she handed *Alleviation*. “But save them, if I’m nearby. Just grab the knife and plunge it in, that’ll do the same job.” Most were skeptical at the beginning, but after several demonstrations and word getting around, they accepted it. She also handed out *Regeneration*, *Invulnerability*, *Invisibility*, basically all she had that might come in handy in the coming combat. She was feeling better by that time, but her rage still simmered in the back of her mind. *I’ll burn it off cutting down imaginary enemies once the combat starts.*

Finally it was time to go.

Johnny stood before the mass of people, giving a not very heartening speech which amounted to ‘don’t die, I need your business’ and turned the floor over to Susan.

“You’ve all seen me wandering about, and I know some of you were there when I reversed that little trap you tried on me a few day ago. I’m now going to tell you the real reason you’re all here. You’re defending not just your homes, or this planet, or even this reality. You’re defending all realities even remotely like this one, because if the creature that’s come to this plane, Darkvoid, has his way, it’s all over for everyone. So expect Balor to have a few tricks up his sleeves, because he’s not the same guy. He’ll be possessed by something far more powerful than even he is alone. But don’t worry, you have me, and here’s how it’s going to go down.

“Those of us with *Avatar*, we’re the front line. You’re going to see some lions, some dragons, and some soldiers made of fire once we go through. They’re mine, and friendly. One warning; the soldiers explode when killed. Don’t get too near them or you might get caught up in it if one goes. Leave the bulk of the physical fighting to me, I can hit every enemy in sight, so even you front line people, don’t go too far. Let them come to us. Everyone without a physical weapon, sling whatever you can from the back, keep barriers up if you can. That’ll be a big help. If you need healing, come see me. I’ll be swinging my blade around, don’t let that bother you. Just grab the knife you’ll see sticking out of my armor, stab anyone wounded with it, and put it back. They’ll be fine, trust me.

“Let’s do this.”

With that, the assembled wizards went out the field behind the castle, and holding the sword of air in her hands, Annie commanded the group be transported to the battlefield.

They were swept up in the magic, as it seemed reality morphed about them as though a line was being drawn. This line swept over the local area and passed them, leaving them in a world slightly changed, and more heavily wooded.

Susan started activating her stored *Symbols*, feeling strength and speed come back to

her. Then she activated her *Legion* and *Magical Allies*, while Sparkle did the same. She issued them orders, and they formed up in front of the wizards. She had only one last thing to do, bringing out a *Spell Paper* and activating it. A glowing circle appeared under her, and she felt a new *Time Anchor* in the back of her mind. *Now we're ready for anything.*

With her two blazing swords in hand, standing next to a number of wizards who also had flaming weapons, she looked back to see if everyone was ready. They seemed expectant, and she turned to give the order to move out.

A great shadow passed overhead, and Susan brought up her blades.

"Wait," said the person next to her. "That might be a friendly, or at least someone who doesn't mean us any direct harm."

It was a crow, but twice the size of a man if not bigger. Johnny went over to speak to it, Susan watched for possible ambush. It wasn't long after the bird left that the first wave of enemies burst from the forest, shouting, and Susan grimly smiled.

*Finally.*

She noted with interest that there were many types, not just the rock type they had such trouble with before. *Good, the fleshy ones will go down easily.* As the *Sense Materia* hadn't been taken, she had matched the radius of that spell with her newly cast *Slash-All*, so she knew when the enemies were in range. When the bulk of them were, she swung both her swords, doing a called shot the body. With *Augment Skill: Sword* going, and the charging creatures basically packed in too tightly to dodge she couldn't possibly miss.

The entire line of forty, horse like beasts included, went down instantly. (Susan's average roll per swing being  $(([\text{random } \# \text{ between } 7 \text{ and } 82] + [\text{fire damage}]) / 3) * 2$ ) See kids, maths are important! The average damage, just looking over the numbers was about a 100 all told, or 33 damage on each creature. That'll even take one of those rock guys down, maybe not dead, but into incap.)

*Come on, that's hardly enough to make me feel even a little better. You can do better than that!*

Spells in the beginning stages of being cast went uncast. Those raising weapons blinked and brought them down again. "Well, come on," she said to those nearest her, and started moving again.

Twice more they were attacked, by larger and larger groups. Both times Susan hardly had to swing her blades for more than two actions before getting them all and bringing them down. Something was nagging her. Sparkle felt it too.

"It doesn't make sense," Sparkle said, concerned, as the latest wave was slaughtered and fell, still meters from their position.

"I know. The Darkness should have made plans taking my *Slash-All* into account. Even if it sent some agent to steal Biddy's body and some of my *Materia*, I know those spells, and it would know that. It would also know I love *Spell Symbol* and would have temporary replacements for them within the hour. WHY is it sending waves of expendable troops at us?"

"Maybe this reenactment can't do anything else?" she ventured. "The Darkness can only control the body it's taken, not the troops it commands?"

"It's making me nervous," she admitted. "We've taken no damage, heck they've not even gotten close! But it doesn't sit right with me."

They went on. Again and again the Fomori came, and died. Susan's face, unseen under her helmet, was grim. She *had* to get that *Materia* back, this battle was proving how useful it could be in combat. Yes, her STRength was being augmented still further by *Augment STR*, but the usefulness of it and *Slash-All* couldn't be denied. But the actions of her enemies, and they must be able to see they couldn't get close without dying, troubled her.

They made good time. With only seconds passing between Susan seeing a group about to charge, and that group being obliterated, they passed over the land quickly. Susan could, with *Acceleration* and *Augment Skill: Off Hand*, get six separate attacks in while they chewed through the ten *Deferred Delay* that would have put any of them close enough to strike. They had no wounded to treat, no dead to mourn. After Susan broke another line of them, Nita came over to her.

"I guess you weren't kidding," she said, looking over the mangled corpses of the Fomori.

"Hm?"

"You told Bidy once that your magic made you an army. I guess you were right."

Susan gave a grim laugh. "And I didn't even have *Giant's Soul* at the time I said that. Think about that for a second. Anyway, you need something? I don't like you being up front here..."

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine. I'm not using any energy, with all the spells I have going there's no need for that." *And if another Paragon should use Magic Sense on me right now, they would be justified for turning tail and running as far away as they could. To magical senses, I'm lit up like a Christmas tree.* "I'm not even getting any *Fatigue* because of my high *ENDurance* and the fact they go down so easily. Each combat doesn't last long enough."

"Oh, okay. Carry on I guess."

"Not to worry, I intend to."

As the party went on, a darkness seemed to descend upon them, and Susan was shocked to lose an energy just walking along, eyes straining for a hint of movement that signaled another attack.

She felt around with *Magic Sense*, but she was so hyped up on magic at the moment, all she felt was herself, even with a fifteen result in the check. A moment later it happened again.

"Pass the word back," she yelled behind her. "This area is draining our energy, so let's pick up the pace a little before even I'm too tired to fight!" She started walking a little more briskly, conscious of *Acceleration* making her faster than normal, and made sure the others could keep pace.

*Not that I've really needed them, thus far.*

The last line of Fomori stretched and stretched, but Susan cut them down as well. By the time those behind the first ones to get hit got in range, the first ones had all but gone down, so Susan could just lazily swing her swords. The group was so small and so tightly together, and the Fomori all attacked from one direction, that Susan was almost bored by the time the last one fell.

*Come on, where are you? She thought angrily. It's not working, so get out here and face me!*

And suddenly, there he was. Down in the darkness, with the flaming soldiers and weapons and the odd wizard light, Balor himself squatted before them. Flabby and putrid, the figure had its eyes closed, but seemed to know the group was there.

"It's about freaking time!" said Susan, stepping up before the ugly form. She wanted to vent, and here was a convenient target for it! "And what is that body you've chosen? Is that seriously the best you could get around here, Darkness? Or Darkvoid, more properly. Wouldn't want my pet name for you to confuse you, oh mountain of flab. Honestly, what do you expect to do, looking like that? Oh, your size is impressive, a plus five, right? Without *Giant's Soul* going it might have even given me pause, you dividing damage by six. Honestly, the dragon form a couple of worlds ago was far scarier, and seemingly more impenetrable. I mean the group of us could easily outrun you, if nothing else. Being *Obese* reduces your speed, after all. And hiding here, what's that all about? Usually you throw yourself at me, almost eager for the chance to do me in. But this time, no, I had to come to you. Plus slaughtering waves of troops? Little reminder, unlike on Aerith's world, I don't get XP and Gil

for each one here. Did you really think that would work? You must have known it wouldn't, given my magic." She paused. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Susan waited.

The figure cracked the smaller of its two eyes open, the one that didn't have an energy attack built into it, and looked around. It peered down at her, taking in her flaming swords, gleaming armor, and aura of magic almost tangible around her.

"I'm sorry," it said, voice like thunder. "Do I know you?"

"OH GIVE ME A BREAK!"

Balor Beaten and What Comes After

Time: About 9:00 PM

Place: The battlefield

*Yeah, that's not me,* said The Darkness, after his howl of laughter died away. *You really think I would climb inside that sluggish thing? Yuck, no thank you.*

"You're not The Darkness?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"I am Balor!" roared the figure. "But The Darkness does have a nice ring to it," he admitted. "Can we get on with it?"

"Oh, what, you have a hot date? Fine. Sparkle?"

"You got it boss. *Colossus.*"

From the ground under Balor a glowing shape started to form, knocking him off balance. He gave a surprised yelp and toppled over as a stone golem, easily as big as he was, ripped free from the earth and threw him to one side as it emerged. "Destroy them!" he shouted, and more Fomori poured out from all sides from the trees.

"I'll need to get closer," shouted Susan to those nearest to her. "It's up to you now, defend everyone not wearing armor. I'll take out Balor."

They started to shout something, about the spear or that she was crazy or both, but she took off running. She had a speed of thirty now, and shot forward in a *charge* against the massive form before her. As she ran, she took the reactive action of ending *Slash-All*. *He'll divide damage enough, I don't need a further reduction.*

Sparkle and Balor went at the same time, so Balor tried to get up, but Sparkle wasn't having any of that. She made a *Mars* check, (as that is how the *Colossus* is controlled) a thirteen, enough to hit him and drive him down to the ground again. (It also did four damage) Susan felt the tremor and tried to imagine a regular person being hit by that amount of stone.

"What is this?" Balor roared, turning his head to look at the thing.

It punched him again, with a sixteen, this time doing three to the body. Sparkle's delay again went up by two, but allowing her to go yet again before Balor could do more than stare at the thing.

*Wouldn't think a creature that big could move that fast,* she thought. *But it's using my delay, which is augmented by Acceleration. Guess I'm a little bit of a cheat too.*

Again the stony fist of the *Colossus* slammed into Balor, but he shifted position a little and it only caught his arm that time.

"Fine," he said, "I will destroy you first then, whatever you are!" His larger eye began to open, and sickly red light shot out, striking the stone creature and driving it back a little. It took six damage to the body, as it also divided everything by six.

*Can't let him destroy this, he'll turn that attack of his on us. I wonder...* The *Colossus* did whatever Sparkle wanted, and Balor was still technically prone. This time, Sparkle made a called shot to the eye, difficulty plus five, so it evened out. She got a fourteen, he got a nineteen on a dodge, but his size subtracted five and his wound subtracted one so she hit! That did another three damage to him, but right in the eye. It snapped closed again and he howled in pain.

This time, Sparkle had to delay by seven segments, because of the called shot, but Balor delayed because he had tried to get away from the stony fist that was flying towards him. This put the delay at 12, and Susan slammed into him from the side.

She got a plus six to her already massive STrength for the *charge*, and slashed upwards, cutting as deep as she could with both swords. This did eight damage, ten damage, and another five fire damage, putting him just over his lethal capacity.

As before, he didn't really have a *Gone* because this was supposed to be a reenactment of events. He wasn't really there, he had been defeated ages ago. In other words, he was supposed to open his eye and the spear was supposed to crash through it, as had happened countless times before. With Susan around, though, nothing goes the way it's supposed to, and the image of Balor burned away before her very eyes. To the wizard's surprise, so did the Fomori.

"Show yourself, Darkness!" cried Susan, smashing the sword into the ground and causing it to crack. "I've had just about enough of your slinking around in the shadows. You want this world? Fine, come and take it from me, right here and now!"

"If you insist," said Bidy, stepping out of nowhere from behind her. Susan whirled. Behind Bidy, a line of elves also appeared to step from nothingness, and all were riding those magnificent horses. They were armed for battle, and their weapons and armor gleamed as the darkness of the area started to lift.

"What are you talking about?" asked Susan, looking them all over. "Give me my *Materia* back! If you insist, what does that even-" She froze.

"Figuring it out, are we? I must say, it's been fun watching you squirm, never knowing who I was in this world."

"No way. You helped us!" insisted Susan.

"Not exactly. Bidy helped you, yes. But she's gone now, so I get to fully take over. She couldn't have beaten me in a contest of wills, but I've been riding around in her head for some time now. Why waste the effort, I asked myself. I knew what was coming, I knew I could get her body without a fight. So only the barest sliver of myself was needed for this world, and now, with her consciousness gone, that sliver has grown enough to take you on. She didn't even know I was there."

"So you're telling me," Susan growled, "that when I first accused you of being The Darkness, I was actually *right*?"

Bidy laughed. "Yes, isn't it fantastic? Oh, I was howling inside after you left, just howling you were so funny. Thanks for taking out the big guy, that's a significant chunk of power freed up for me to use." She did something, reached into the air where Balor had been, and seemed to pull. She smiled as energy poured into her, Balor's body seeming to return, ghostlike, and get sucked into her. "Very nice," she purred. With that, she gestured, and the spear was in her hand. "Now, shall we have that fight you so desperately wanted?"

Susan raised her blades. "With pleasure."

"Wait," commanded the queen. "Will our assistance be needed?"

"If she starts to win, shoot her," suggested Bidy.

"We do have archers," the queen said hesitantly.

"Wait a second, you guys are on her side? Since when?" demanded Susan, looking over at the queen.

"Oh, yeah, I may have gone this morning and convinced them you were evil. Whoops!"

"And then stood there and proved yourself wrong," Susan countered.

"You think they're hearing our actual conversation? No, no, silly girl. They're hearing you go on and on about taking this world over, and reducing everything to ashes. See, they just saw *you* take Balor's power for yourself."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Illusion magic, even this wizardry kind, can be handy sometimes. What can I say?"

"Fine, I'll deal with them later."

"Suit yourself." She lunged.

Susan got a 24 to deflect the attack, which proved inadequate despite it being her maximum roll at the moment. Her armor took it, and she used her off hand action to swing at Bidy, hoping she wouldn't be quick enough to parry. She underestimated the speed of a spear, and the attack was batted away in a blur. Bidy kept the spear spinning, handling it like a pro.

Susan darted in, trying to get inside that spinning blade, but not making a called shot given how she was handling it. She failed to knock it away, and took a minor scratch to the head, specifically the ear. She followed up with her off hand attack, and again beat her by one to scratch her right leg for two damage.

"I really must thank for you for this *Soul*," said Bidy. "That attack might have taken my head off, otherwise!" She came in close with the spear again, which Susan knocked away and again brought her other blade up to try and get a shot in. This too was knocked away.

*Okay, not sure if this is going to get us anywhere. "Dazzle!"*

But even as she cast, Bidy sneered at her and the magic fizzled.

“Did you forget I could shut down your magic?”

“No, I just wanted to test if you could do that here.”

“Like the world makes any difference. I know how your father does it, that will never change.”

“Worth a try.” She swung again, trying desperately to think of something else she could do to take Bidy down. Her first attack nicked her body, the second was deflected. Susan couldn’t help but notice that even with *Acceleration* going, Bidy was nearly as fast as she was. *Come on, think. There must be something else I can do.*

Suddenly, one of Sparkle’s *Magical Ally* lions barreled past and leapt into Bidy, taking both of them by surprise.

Bidy managed to bring the spear up and shoved the lion past her, making it go wide and have to spin to face her again.

*Thank you, Sparkle.*

Out of the corner of her eye, Susan saw another lion a step away, and swung low as the lion jumped, forcing Bidy to decide what attack she wanted to try defending against. It didn’t seem to work out that way, as Bidy went back to swinging the spear in a tight arc around her body, and managed to knock both attacks away with ease. Then a third lion joined them, the last one Sparkle had created, and two went to try wrestling her to the ground. Even coming from different directions, the blows were knocked away, the spear hardly seeming to skip a beat.

Susan now saw her chance.

“*Dazzle!*” she cast again, as the second lion now was up again, and making a grab for her. Bidy couldn’t defend against both, but seemed to shake off the spell without effort. Her concentration slipped just enough to let the lion get through that whirling defense, and the other lions moved in from either side, trying a slash this time with their claws rather than a *wrestling* action. Both were knocked away.

Now the lion that had touched her made a *Wrestling* check, but with Bidy’s immense STrength, she didn’t go anywhere. She did have to stop swinging the spear around, however, and that was Susan’s opening to make a called shot to the body with both blades, driving them in as hard as she could.

Bidy cried out, but stayed up. “Cheater!” she cried. “Couldn’t take me yourself?”

“I’m the cheater?” Susan protested. “You stole the only thing keeping you alive from me!”

Bidy started to retort, but now all three lions went, “three” and “one” now leaping up to try and help their companion drive Bidy to the ground. Both made *Unarmed* checks, and Bidy now tried dodging them, but with her wounds and the other lion still holding onto her, she couldn’t. Now all three were atop her, trying to drag her down.

“Fine!” she said, closing her eyes and then opening them again. A wave of energy engulfed them all, forcing them back. Susan couldn’t even make a STrength check to not be blown back, and Bidy was now standing alone, leaning on the spear.

“Oh, now who’s the cheater?” taunted Susan. “Couldn’t win without bringing Balor’s powers into it, huh? Fight with your own STrength, I allowed you the weapon you forged, didn’t I?”

“Ah, curse this world for not having a decent fighter to take over. Or dragons.”

“Your loss,” said Susan, as she and all three lions now went at the same time. Susan again drove the blades into Bidy as the lions jumped towards her. They all bounced off with a **clang**, as an energy shield Susan had seen before came into being.

*Crap, that’s the same technique the dragon used! She’ll start healing in there, I know it. Does The Darkness have a healing technique or did the dragon just have some kind of regeneration thing going? If she has to heal herself with wizardry, we have a little time.*

“What are you going to do?” asked Sparkle, who had now come over because the danger had, for the moment, passed.

“We know an explosion directed inside the shield can break it, want to try your *Elemental Line?*”

“No, look there at the ground.” Susan did, and it seemed the barrier extended there as well. Neither one of them knew a similar spell to the *Explosion* magic that Louise could do, so

that was out. "Couldn't you hit her with *Slash-All*?"

"Maybe. Have to cast it again, though, I took it off to hit Balor earlier."

"Not much for it then, I guess."

"I wonder... how tough do you think those *Materia* are, anyway?"

"Don't know, never needed to worry about it before. The real one was like a sap that had hardened, right? The other was plain metal, so probably not all that great. Why?"

Susan shook her head. "Any area effect attack would have a chance of damaging them, and with the *Giant's Soul* going she wouldn't take much damage except from something with a lot of energy thrown in."

"Ah, true. Hey, think you could get the two away from her?"

"You mean- worth a shot. I don't know *exactly* where they are, like in which pocket. But I do know they must be with her, that should be good enough."

And it was.

Susan walked away from the domed figure, who was concentrating on healing anyway, and probably wasn't going to notice. With two quick *Retrieval* spells in a row, Susan gratefully popped the two real *Materia* back in place, and now knew it didn't matter if Bidy healed herself. Her next attack would finish the job. But she had something to do first.

"You all have been very quiet," she said the elves, still just sitting there on the horses.

"We were told not to attack you," said the queen. "But what is that darkness? I have never seen such a thing, and it is not wizardry."

"That's the power of The Darkness. It's an energy from higher dimensions, so it's tough to get through. I'm going to try in a moment, and I wanted to know if I would have you as enemies when she was defeated."

The queen looked troubled. "I know she convinced me you were evil, but now I am having trouble recalling exactly what she said to make me believe that."

*Good, her hold must be slipping as she's concentrating on other stuff at the moment.*

"You just keep thinking about," suggested Susan. "I'll take care of- woah!"

Inside the shield, something new was happening. Bidy had given up trying to heal herself, probably feeling the loss of the *Materia* she had been carrying. She was now powering up that ball of darkness Susan had seen inside Tom's soul. However, she figured this version might be a little bit more destructive, as it was out here in the real world.

"She's going to blow herself up!" she shouted, pointing to the ball. "Get everyone out of here. Run, take them back to the main world."

The queen considered, then gave a single nod. "Very well, but what of you?"

"I'll think of something, go!"

The elves spurred their horses and raced towards the wizards who still weren't exactly sure what was going on. The battle with Balor hadn't taken more than a few seconds, and had not gone how any of them envisioned. Then Ronan started yelling about the spear being gone, Bidy seemed to be alive, they were fighting... who could blame them? Now they had beings they thought would be allies charging down upon them. It didn't take much to get them moving away from the area and back to a place they could cross over from.

"Any ideas, boss?" asked Sparkle.

She shook her head. "Not many. It's not magic, I checked, it's more like a dimensional energy, so *Dead Magic* won't work." She glanced upwards. "You still have the golem, we could hide behind that."

"I could collapse it, that might shield us."

"Maybe. But she could gather enough energy to blow away this whole world for all we know!"

"So get her out of there early. Try *Telesummon*."

"And get that ball in the face? You crazy? I don't know how much damage it'll do, it could kill me."

"Better figure out something fast."

"I know that. What spells do you know that could help?"

“Let me think.”

Both mentally reviewed the spells they knew.

“I could blow off her head.”

“We need to do something that gives us a chance to get away. Something that forces her to not charge it as much as she could, but also delays her from triggering it immediately. She has to think she can hold out at least a few seconds while we get- Wait, I think I have it. Get ready to put every defensive spell we have on, and have the *Colossus* pick us up and run away. For now give me *Energetic Accumulation*.”

“Okay.”

That done, Susan sprinted over to the barrier, that she could vaguely see inside of, where the ball of darkness was growing. She quickly put her one sword in the *Pocket Dimension*, the other she absorbed back into herself, praying that as the scene wasn't over, the spell would keep going. It did.

*Hope this works.*

Susan gathered energy, putting most of what she had left into this effort. With her one hand she cast a quick *Thrust*, making Bidy rattle around in her little prison but not seriously hurting her. That wasn't the point. The point was to knock the breath out of her lungs as she used her off hand action to cast *Elemental Conjure: Water* with all the energy she could put into it. As it was the same “action” she could do the *Thrust* without losing the gathered energy, and sixty liters of water suddenly appeared inside the barrier. That amounted to 3661 cubic inches, or eight cubic meters. The barrier was not eight meter across, and the surprised Bidy suddenly found herself without air to breathe.

*Take that, thought Susan. The Darkness might not have to breathe, but that body I think does. You just hold out while I get away now...*

Susan took off running, scooping up Sparkle who started casting *Armor of Magic* on them both. That done, they were near the *Colossus* who she then had scoop them up. Susan then was able to cast *Invulnerability* on them both, then followed it up with *Regeneration*. She threw maximum energy and spent a minimum of time on both, figuring it was better to be out of energy and alive then have some left and be dead.

The explosion tore through the *Colossus*, sending huge chunks of rock, and the two small *Paragons*, soaring through the air...

“...like a child's imagination.” --Deadlift

Off to the Next World

Time: Thirty seconds later

Place: Balor's dimension

After about thirty seconds the rumbling and shaking stopped, and Susan found she was still alive, just pinned by some rubble from the exploding *Colossus*. She had been protected by all the defensive magic she had put on earlier, and breathed a sigh of relief. *Now to get out of here and see what sort of damage that explosion did.*

The trouble was she couldn't do any physical magic, because of being pinned under tons of rock. That didn't mean she was helpless, as Pluto spells were INSight based, meaning they didn't need physical movement. One quick *Phase* later, and she was walking through the stone and out to a scene of devastation that gave her an appreciation for just how thankful she was not to have been hit by that energy ball point blank.

*Now, where has my companion gone?*

She didn't see Sparkle anywhere, so figured she was also buried in the rubble somewhere. That was good enough for the *Telesummon* spell, and a few seconds later Sparkle was in her arms again.

"Thank you," she breathed, blinking against the light. "Don't know how much longer I could have lasted."

"Couldn't you have used *Dimension Step*?"

"Tried. Didn't work here, probably because this is some weird sub-dimension already."

"Ah, I guess so." *Wait a second, light?*

Susan and Sparkle looked around. Apart from the chunks of rock that had made up the *Colossus*, there was a huge crater in the ground centered on Bidy's last location. But the light- that was new. The oppressive darkness that had been draining Susan's energy was gone, and the world seemed to be on the way towards becoming more like the sword and spear. More real, in other words.

"What happened to the spear?" Susan asked, glancing around. Both made *perception* checks, Susan getting an eleven and Sparkle getting an eighteen. "There," she said, pointing with a paw. It was stuck, point first, into the side of the crater wall, and Susan did one last spell, *Retrieval*, getting it back in hand.

With that, the *scene* ended, and Susan's magic splintered away from her. She was normal sized, unarmored, and low on energy. *But I think it's over.* "Now, how do we get back? I would just leave, but we really should return the spear."

"Need a lift?"

Susan turned around, and there was the elf on the white horse, staring down at her.

"My mother told me not to get into the cars of strange men," she joked.

"I'm not a man."

*Dang it, you were supposed to say the horse wasn't a car! Oh well.* "True enough." She held out a hand, and the man helped her climb up. Nearby, the queen and the others were appearing.

"I will bring this one back and then return, your majesty," he said to the queen.

"That is well," she replied. "But first, allow me to offer my apology. We were somehow deceived, and while we did not attack you, we did ride against you."

Susan shook her head. "It was never the intention of The Darkness to have you fight me. It wanted to destroy me, then all the wizards that were left. With you in the same place, there would be a good chance you would be destroyed too. That would have been a lot of energy freed up at once, and removing a lot of opposition to it's plans. That's what I think, anyway."

"Perhaps you are right. What did happen here?" The queen looked out over the hole in the ground.

Susan chuckled. "Seems to have brightened up considerably. I think... because I didn't actually follow the script, the recording got broke. Plus Bidy grabbed up the energy that powered the Balor recording, so that's been released now that she's dead." *I wonder if The Darkness took that energy with it? Oh well, on the whole it can't amount to much when*

*weighed against an entire dimension.* "I don't think the image of Balor will rise here again."

The queen nodded. "I too believe that. Go well, traveler."

"Thank you, your majesty."

With that, the elves spurred their horses and galloped off to see what this land held for them.

Susan returned to the other side and hugged Nita and Annie, who were happy to see she was still alive.

"Thanks to every defensive magic I could think of!" she assured them.

"It's gone then, this darkness you spoke of?" asked Johnny.

"Blew itself up trying to take me out. Soon as I leave, the being that sent me here will drop defensive barriers around this reality and you'll just have your own, local, evils to worry about."

"As it should be. Thank you, for helping us. I know that you're the reason all of us came back here, and unharmed." He looked a little embarrassed. "I see why you're a bit... vain. You weren't kidding about being powerful, so I guess it's deserved."

"I guess. Anyway, who wants the spear? Can't exactly take it with me, now can I?"

"I'll take it," said Ronan, walking up. "I felt something from it, and I could carry it easily."

Susan looked to Johnny, who nodded. She handed the spear over and looked over the departing wizards. "Sure you don't want me to gather energy and clear this overlay? I could stay."

"No!" he said, a little too quickly. "I mean, no, it's our problem to deal with. We'll live with it."

"Okay. I guess this is—"

"You can't leave yet!" insisted Nita. "I promised you a trip to the moon, didn't I?"

Three days later, having left from Nita's house, Susan, Sparkle, and Kit stood on the moon and looked down at the Earth. Nita had gotten to go home early, given her task in Ireland was done, so her parents no longer felt the compulsion to have her there and let her come back. As the TSA hadn't been invented yet, Susan and Sparkle rode in her pocket, *shrunk* down, and got through security with ease.

She had made copies of some of her spells, so wizards there could look them over. As well as copies of the pages detailing the skills she had started to teach them, so they could have the complete reference.

"Thank you," Susan said at last, having slipped a piece of moon rock into her sub-space pocket. Not that she thought it might disappear, but rather it was just less flashy than using her magic, and she didn't want to call attention to it.

*Not sure what I'll do with a piece of the moon, but hey, you never know. And it's a nice reminder of this place.* She also had gotten her camera out, and snapped some pictures. *Harry and the others won't believe me, otherwise.*

"Sure," said Nita and Kit together, smiling. "Least we could do," finished Nita.

"Guess it's time for me to move on," Susan said, facing them. "You've shown me something cool, guess I'll return the favor. Oh, there is one more thing, though." She got out a stack of *Alleviation spell papers* and handed them to Nita. "My healing magic seems a bit better than yours, so use these as you see fit, okay."

"Thanks."

"This one, however," she said, taking one out of the stack, "is for a special purpose. Hold onto it. You'll know when the time is right to use it."

"Is it different?" Nita asked, comparing that one to the top one on the stack.

"Oh, no, I just picked one at random. All I mean is, keep one handy, if you start using them up really fast. The guy who sent me here said you might need it. Remember, it can cure disease as well as heal."

"Got it." Nita made them disappear into her own otherspace pocket.

"Good luck, you two," she said, hugging them both. "Now get some weapons made, honestly!"

They all laughed, and Susan stepped back. She brought her watch up, tapping it to call

back to the Hub.

“Yes?” asked the agent.

“Ready for transport.”

“From... the moon? I suppose it doesn't matter. Very well, doorway opening, welcome back.”

A doorway of light opened next to her, and both wizards seemed suitably impressed.

“Go well,” both said.

“Bye,” she said, slipping into it with Sparkle next to her.

She found herself back at the Hub, and stepped out of the transport room into the main area where the agents worked.

“Well done!” said Silverstreak, coming over to her. “Another branch saved, another group of people suitably awed by your power.”

“Thanks. You don't mind if I stay, do you? We both have some XP to spend.”

“You know I don't. Remember your way there?”

“Uh.”

“Come on,” said Sparkle. “At least one of us doesn't have *no sense of direction*.”

And so Susan and Sparkle spent their XP, Sparking having just enough to raise her *Spirit Mage* skill group from a three to a five, while Susan raised it to a four. She then asked the wizards there about her *Imbued* items, and what she could do about them. The gun was first.

“If you don't mind sacrificing a little of the XP you put into it,” said the agent that was helping her, “it can be transferred in a variety of ways. You could simply move the spell to a *Materia* like ball, and fit it inside your bracelet. Or, you can use the stored energies inside it to power a different spell, and just use it up in the process. You get back three quarters of the XP, so you only have to make up one quarter.”

“It would destroy the gun?”

“Afraid so. Pulling magic out of something, in this way, isn't pretty.”

Susan considered. *Would the more useful spell of Magic Domination be worth the loss of the gun? I'll never find more ammo for it, and really, bullets? I can hit someone way harder now. It's just the principal of the thing... for worlds that would even recognize it.*

“Okay, show me how, if you don't mind?”

“Not at all, I'm at your disposal. Which type would you like...”

So Susan transferred the spell energies from the gun to a *Materia* orb, getting nine XP out of the gun, and putting in four of her own to create an energy based *Magic Domination* item. With it active, the only type of magic that would work in an eighteen meter radius around her... was hers. (And Sparkle's, as they sort of counted as the same “person,” Sparkle being her *companion* and all. They learned from the same book of magic, after all.)

That left her with four XP, so she took three from astronomy, three of her own, and raised her *Martial Arts* to a three. With the last point she bought *wrestling*, because why not?

As for the knife, that was trickier.

“Are you sure you don't want to leave it like this?” asked the agent, looking it over.

“It's caused some problems, people who don't know what it is walking in on me with it stuck into someone.”

The agent smiled. “The universe does like to play its little jokes, don't it?”

“Is that what you call them?”

He chuckled. “We could easily turn it into a rod of some kind, but you would have to do the transfer and rework the spell to turn it into a *Materia* like form. It's a touch based spell, and the way you've set it up is to go off when you touch someone with it. To use it in *Materia* form you would have to physically touch the person you wanted to heal with the sphere. You could rework the spell to activate with a word and a touch, just like you reworked the gun's spell. What most concerns me is you running into creatures like those on your home world, that you

can only defeat with a spell like this. Then you'll be back here wanting to put it back this way."

"Oh, never thought of that. Okay, better leave it as is, then. Thanks for taking a look. Wait a second- wouldn't a rod be just as effective? I mean if the spell is touch..."

"Wouldn't just touching someone with the knife be as effective?" the agent countered. "You don't actually have to stab the person you want to heal, right? That just insures it doesn't deflect off. If the thing isn't struggling against you, just hold the knife up to them. Don't touch their clothes, obviously, that will trigger the spell against the cloth. Just hold it against their skin." The agent paused, eyes narrowed. "You really haven't been stabbing people with this, have you?"

"Ah?"

Sparkle just shook her head, sighing.

They then chose the next world to visit, which had the following notes:

*Many, many types of magic here. There are also many gods and demons that can be called upon. Be careful, you may be powerful but you're no deity! One type of magic is quite new; Warlocky. I would start with investigating this, its recent appearance is too coincidental not to be related to Darkvoid. Try not to get too off track, you'll have some time but remember why you're there.*

Fully rested, fed, and ready for action, Susan stepped through and looked around the new world she found herself in.

She found herself on a rather busy road in what seemed to be a fair size city. At least, what a fair sized city would be before automobiles, modern roads, material techniques to build more than two or three stories, and modern sewer systems. The houses were packed tightly together, and there wasn't much vegetation to be seen, mostly dirt roads with some flat stones used for walkways to people's doors. People in rough, home spun style clothing milled about doing various things, and Susan was impressed with the variety of people she saw. Old, young, light skinned, dark skinned, people in robes that others gave a wide berth to- she saw a little bit of everything.

She also smelled a little bit of everything, and wrinkled her nose.

"Weird smell," she remarked, looking about.

"You should come down here, and my nose is better," complained Sparkle.

As far as the buildings were concerned, a lot of stone was in evidence, but there were a fair number made of timber. Thatching seemed to be the material of choice for the roofs, but the larger places had tile. All very "medieval" and not in the good way (if there was a good way at that time). All in all it looked poor, like maybe this world's people had given up a little, like it was too much effort to do some painting at the very least.

*Back with Louise, there was at least some semblance of order and pride in one's environment. And aren't these people supposed to have "all kinds" of magic? Where is it all? These are not the homes of magic users, unless they're some kind of ruling class and live elsewhere. Seen that before.*

The people, some of them having witnessed Susan stepping out of nowhere, quickly lost interest when she did little but stand there and stare back at them. Soon the street went back to normal, though more than one person, mostly young people darting about playing, stared at her openly. It took a moment to allow her to work out why.

Her clothes.

Universally the woman wore long skirts and the men wore pants, *though I suppose the more proper term is breeches*. The youngest kids wore a sort of loose T-shirt that hung down to their thigh, while everyone in their teen years or so wore more adult clothing. Susan, dressed in jeans and a neutral colored T-shirt stuck out because not only were her clothes obviously "otherworldly" she was not wearing a skirt.

*And even on my world, a boy running around in women's clothes would get some odd looks. I know how they would feel, right now, because of my obvious "men's clothes" getting those same looks. I suppose I could Creation up some more suitable garments. Hey, wonder if Silverstreak would mind me turning the portal on, glancing through, getting a feel for the style, and turning it off while I made something up? Oh well, guess I have more important things to worry about.*

"So where to, boss?" asked Sparkle. "The smell isn't getting any better the longer we stand here."

"Not sure," she replied. "Usually we get met by someone, right? *Something* happens to lead us to where we need to be, at least something always has thus far."

"Which is not to say it always will," cautioned Sparkle. "Your father sometimes had to travel quite a distance to get to the bottom of things. And it's eighty/twenty meeting someone, sometimes he never did."

"Humm, I see. Shall we wander a bit, see what this fine town has on offer?"

"Fine with me."

So Susan turned and started walking, not caring to try and remember all the turns she made on the haphazardly laid out streets. She passed an open air marketplace, streets where the houses looked better constructed, and the occasional man or woman on horseback, sneering down at the peasantry that was obviously beneath them.

"Do you hear something?" she asked Sparkle, looking around.

"Lots of things, did you mean something in particular?"

"Something's muttering, like. But I can't make out what it's trying to say. I figured you would hear it, if I hear a whisper it should be a shout for a cat."

Sparkle stopped a moment and swiveled her ears. "Just people. Maybe you're hearing them?"

"I don't know, it doesn't sound like distant crowd noises, more like... Actually if I had to put a name on it, I would say it was The Darkness muttering something. Hey, big guy, you in there?"

*Indeed, Susan. You noticed right away, well done.* It broke into a very disturbing laugh. Which was weird, hearing the odd muttering while the same voice seemed to be whooping it up like they just won the lottery. Finally the laughing died down, but the muttering continued, an undertone the voice of The Darkness cut across. *Coming here, and so soon after you had all that trouble with the possessed woman? It's like you're begging me to kill you! This world is really going to be a treat for me, I mean is it Christmas already? Because you didn't have to get me a present, honest.*

*What are you talking about? What's this noise I'm hearing? It has something to do with your avatar here?*

*Oh no, I don't want to ruin the surprise. Don't worry, it won't be long.*

*What won't be?*

*Not telling! Ha ha ha!*

"Uh, Susan?"

"Yeah, sorry. He's practically skipping about upstairs," she pointed to her head. "This world, something really major is going to go down here. I need a better look, see what we're dealing with."

The city seemed huge, especially after Susan ducked down a quiet alley and did a *Flight* spell to get a better look. At first she wanted to stay out of sight, but someone caught sight of her floating about, gave a sort of bow, and moved on.

*So they don't freak out when seeing magic, so it must be well known. Where is it all? It's common enough they see someone doing magic as 'oh, someone doing magic' rather than the more extreme reactions the wizards at home are so worried about. Rightly so, I mean. This place... what's that?*

Susan had gotten a nineteen on her *Perception* check, and peered over the row of houses in the direction of the sound. There, sitting in the dirt and crying, was a young girl. She was probably not yet a teenager, the cut off for wearing adult clothes, as she just had on a

filthy and torn tunic. She was bare legged and had bare feet, unruly hair, and looked utterly rejected by the world. She was in front of a run down house and had left the door open, which Susan thought might be somewhat dangerous in a place like this. She hadn't seen any 'city guard' or anything resembling law enforcement, and a city this size must have its share of thieves.

People passing saw her, but looked away, hurrying past.

*That can't be right.*

"Hey Sparkle, we're going one street over."

"Okay!"

Susan looked around for the best way to the other side of this particular alley, and made her way over to the crying girl.

"Hey, do you need some help?" she asked, crouching down beside the girl.

She looked up at Susan with some astonishment, as though this offer of help was somehow unbelievable, and hadn't been previously considered. She choked back a sob.

"I think my mom is dead."