

What a World

Time: Just then

Place: Outside the little girl's house

"Show me," demanded Susan, holding a hand out. She was rather angry with all the people she had seen walk by, who had not stopped to see what this little girl's problem might be. And with Silverstreak, who had not sent her here early enough to save this little girl's mother, should she really be dead. If he had mentioned something, she wouldn't have bothered raising her one skill set. That could be done later, after all. It wasn't worth a life.

It's not their problem, The Darkness explained.

Of course it is, don't you know the phrase 'it takes a village to raise a child.'

Eh, never had offspring myself. Susan, Susan, Susan. This world is a pretty harsh place, as you'll learn. Why would they stick their necks out for a crying little girl? Maybe she just got a spanking or something, how would they know? Best to keep to yourself, after all, these people have their own problems. They don't need somebody else's, as well.

Good thing I'm not most people.

Keep telling yourself that. As far as your chrome plated friend, even he can't see every little life in these worlds. He's strictly big picture, you know?

The girl took Susan's hand and led her inside, into the back where there was a small bedroom. The whole house was small, cramped, dirty, and none too pleasant smelling.

"Ugh, worse in here," remarked Sparkle.

"Yeah. Oh no." Susan looked at the bed, where the body of the girl's mother lay, lifeless.

"I don't know what to do," the girl said, looking up at her.

"At the moment, I'm not sure what to do either. I'm probably too late to save her..." *But I do have time travel magic in the book. With lots of warnings next to it.* "I'm sorry for your loss, but your mother is dead."

The girl took a deep breath. "I know. What's going to happen to me?"

Susan shook her head. "I don't know, but I'll figure something out. Come on, let me think for a moment." She pulled the girl out into the front room and looked around. "First of all, what happened?"

"She got sick, I think? It started a few days ago, but she told me not to worry. Yesterday when I woke up she didn't get out of bed."

"Yes-" *What the? This girl's mother has been dead more than a day?* "Didn't you have anyone to talk to about this?" The girl shook her head. "It's just me and my mom here."

"There must be someone!"

Again, a shake of the head.

I suppose they don't have 9-1-1 here. Man, this is a problem all right. I hope she's not still contagious. Might want to hit this girl with the knife later, maybe when she's asleep and not prone to ask questions. What does a society like this one do with dead bodies anyway? Is this sort of thing common? But they have magic!

"I'm hungry."

"What?" Susan looked around the room, then realized how foolish that was. *No refrigerators in evidence. These people probably buy their food daily, otherwise it would spoil.* "I'll get you something to eat while I think about things, okay?"

"Okay."

Susan cast *Create Foodstuff*, and the girl's eyes lit up. "Magic!" she breathed. "You're a wizard!"

"Something like that, take whatever you want. If you show me where you have a knife I'll cut some of that bread for you, and an apple as well. I can make you a sandwich."

"A what?"

"Seriously? Here." With the knife the girl got out, Susan cut up the bread, cheese, and meat, assembling them for the child, who tore into them. While she ate, Susan jerked her head to Sparkle and the pair went back into the mother's room.

"Think I should go back in time, it's only two days. The knife could save her."

“What, you’re asking me now? Usually you just run off and do stuff.” Susan eyed her. “As you’ve asked, I can see a few problems with that. First, you didn’t exist here two days ago, so will that magic even work?”

“Uh...”

“Second, if you do, it’ll cause a paradox. That little girl won’t be outside crying when we arrive now. So we’ll never know to come back in time and heal this woman.”

“There are warnings about that.”

“Yeah, a lot of them. Plus, there’s Silverstreak’s note to consider.”

“What?”

“Playing God? Get it out again, it specially warns against that, and making it so this woman doesn’t die, in essence bringing her back from the dead- that sounds like playing God to me.”

“And maybe the actual gods that are around here might take exception to that.”

“Who can say? But I find it rather striking that the first person we meet is a little girl and you start talking about time travel. You never suggested that at home.”

“No, the warnings kept me away. But in this case I know of nothing else to save this woman.”

“No, even you can’t bring back the dead. And with good reason. Be very sure this isn’t going to go wrong somehow before you attempt it.”

And so she did. It broke her heart, but she was going to have to go back out there and tell that little girl there was nothing she could do.

Is there nothing you could do? I mean you could make her a zombie. That’s something. Gross! Don’t even suggest that! But you’re right, we have to do something.

She marched back out.

“This is good, what is it?” asked the little girl, half her sandwich eaten.

“Uh... meat?” hedged Susan. “It’s made of magic, so I don’t think it’s anything really specific.”

“Tastes like chicken.”

“Could be chicken. Listen, a town this size, they must have someone in charge of something like this. You know your home better than I do, you can’t think of anyone?”

Her face screwed up in concentration, still chewing. “The city guard?”

Susan snapped her fingers. “Now you see, we’re getting somewhere. You could have gone to them any time.”

Her face fell. “They wouldn’t listen to a kid.”

“Oh. Maybe not. Well, they’ll listen to me. Finish your food... oh.” Susan looked around, finally deciding upon a cook pot, which he cast a quick *Elemental Conjunction* for some water. She found a cup and dipped some out for her. Sparkle had walked to the doorway, and looked like she wanted to talk some more. “I’ll be waiting outside. What’s your name, by the way?”

“I’m Illina the Quick.”

“I’m Susan, nice to meet you.”

“That’s a weird name!” She giggled.

“I’m not from around here. Besides, wizards always have weird names, right?”

“I guess.” She didn’t sound convinced. Susan turned to go. “Susan?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. For stoping to help me.”

“Don’t mention it kid, it’s what I do. Eat your sandwich.”

“What are we going to do with this kid?” Sparkle asked. “We can’t drag her around with us, fighting The Darkness.”

“I can’t just leave her here alone with her dead mother, either!”

“I know, it’s just... don’t get too carried away, the note said. Plus we’re not sticking around, so don’t get too attached.”

“I know that. We’ll find a place for her, it shouldn’t take long. We only just got here, and we need to find out more about how this world works. We can do that while we figure

something out for her.”

“Good point, we don’t know how this world works. If she’s an orphan, we have no idea what the policy is.”

“So we’ll ask!”

“I guess you can easily pass for a foreigner, wearing those clothes.”

“You noticed that too, huh?”

“Those strange looks you were getting? Yeah, I noticed. Just keep the bigger picture in mind, is all I’m saying.”

“I will.”

A few minutes later Illina came outside and closed the door. “Don’t suppose you know where we can find one of the city guard?” She shrugged helplessly. “Okay then. We’ll head back to the market, there must be someone in authority there if there’s a dispute.” She held out a hand, and Illina took it. Sparkle led the way.

“Uh, are we following your cat?”

“Her name is Sparkle, and yes, I am. Believe me, I can’t find my way anywhere, so I’m glad to have her.” Sparkle glanced back over her shoulder. “And for more than just that, too!” she hastened to add. Sparkle found this only somewhat acceptable, but let the matter drop.

“Oh, okay. Is she a real cat?”

“Real? Of course she’s real. Why wouldn’t she be?”

“Never heard any stories about a wizard that kept a cat. I thought she might be animated by magic.”

“Totally real cat. And you obviously need some better stories.”

At the marketplace Susan looked around for someone in at least some semblance of a uniform and looking bored. She didn’t have to look long.

“Good day, sir,” she said, marching up to him.

“Hello. Can I help... you...?” The guard looked her up and down as if not believing his eyes. Susan decided to ignore that.

“I hope so. This girl’s mother has died recently. I’m actually a stranger to this, uh, area of the world. I need to know what should be done about it.”

“I see. Murdered?”

“No, seems to have gotten sick.”

“Ah. Well, there’s two choices of course. The first is the cheap way. We can take the body and bury it somewhere. The second is the not so cheap way. Nearest temple is not far from here. You can pay for a proper burial, with proper prayers to help lead the soul to the afterlife.”

Susan looked down at Illina, who was threatening to cry again. “I don’t have any money.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure gold is the same everywhere.” *Good thing I’ve picked some up along the way, seems like this is a precious metal economy.*

“Indeed it is!” agreed the guard. “Would you like directions, then?”

“Please.”

With Sparkle again leading the way, the trio found the temple, which was actually somewhat hard to miss. Various depictions of what could only be gods adorned the front, and the place had a certain atmosphere about it that fairly shouted holy ground. The two humans walked inside, with Sparkle hanging out front, watching people go by.

“How can I help you, my... child?” The man that approached them seemed startled by Susan’s clothes. *Really have to do something about that.*

She explained the situation, and the man expressed his sympathies to Illina. She seemed shy and hid behind Susan.

“And what is your relation to the child?” asked the man.

“I’m just a passerby, saw her crying and investigated.”

“Truly? To think such compassion still existed! Except... what exactly are your intentions towards her?”

“Not sure yet. Why? Is there a place to take orphans in the city?”

“No, that’s why I ask. You don’t look like a slaver, but-”

“Slaver? Of course not! How could you even say such a thing?”

The man held his palm up, which Susan thought was probably a cultural thing. “It’s usually what happens to those who become homeless. They’re picked up by slavers.”

“Seriously?”

Keeps them off the streets, explained The Darkness. It’s a good system, really. Rather than clutter up the town and disrupt the regular folks, begging at whatnot, they get sold into slavery. Gives them a purpose, keeps them honest.

“I’m afraid so,” the man went on.

“Don’t worry. I’ll find her a home somewhere, and not as a slave either.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Now, if you would like to come with me?”

The pair was led into the building, and to the back of the place, where the caskets were. Only, they all seemed to be metal, not wood, which Susan thought would have been cheaper. The man was suddenly all business. “Now, our most basic package is one silver, which includes a fairly basic casket,” he indicated the no frills box, “and an apprentice will perform the necessary prayers for the poor woman’s soul. For fifteen silver the casket is quite a bit nicer,” again, the indication of the model, “and a journeyman will perform the needed prayers.”

“And for gold?” prompted Susan.

“Ah, yes, for gold. Two rounds of gold, and a master Theurgist will be employed to make sure the soul of the deceased will reach the afterlife safely.”

Rounds? Does he mean coins? Two gold coins? “I only have coins of my homeland,” Susan admitted honestly. “Can you weigh them out or is there a money changer in the city I could speak to?”

The man looked Susan over again, somewhat shocked. “You’re really going to pay gold? For an orphan girl’s mother you never met? You did say you were just passing by, right? I heard that correctly?”

Susan nodded.

“You don’t have to,” insisted Illina, tugging her hand. “I only just met you!”

And this is crazy, but my mother’s dead, so funeral, maybe?

Shut it, Darkness.

What? That was gold right there. Comedy gold. Too bad you can’t spend that, you could make a fortune.

“Yes, I think I can afford two lousy ‘rounds.’ Unless there’s some huge weight difference, anyway.”

“We can weigh them, it will be no trouble at all!”

“Fine. Now where did I put that pouch?” She asked no one in particular. Taking the entire 1.2 seconds, she reached into her *Pocket Dimension* which of course caused a flash of magic to be seen.

“What was that?” asked the man, looking at the pouch.

“What was what?” Susan asked back, innocently. “Now, two you said, right?” She opened the pouch and took out two coins she had gotten from Anrietta’s kingdom, handing them over.

“Strange design, but they do seem to be gold. Let me go and get a scale, I’ll be right back.”

Susan, not wanting to trek through the streets with a body, caused a minor stir when she opened a *Teleportal* and walked back to the house.

“Never seen magic like this,” said the man, sticking his head through. “The god Asham the Gate-Keeper can make a doorway such as this, but I never heard of a wizard doing so. And you didn’t even use any components. Did you have it already prepared?” He didn’t give Susan a chance to answer. “Of course you did. Silly of me. Sorry, it’s not every day a foreign

wizard walks into town, decides to help an orphan girl, and pays in *gold*.”

“Too bad. The world might be a very different place if they did.”

“As you say, as you say.”

Susan wrapped the body up in the blanket on the bed and easily picked her up.

“You’re stronger than you look.”

“Oh, I’m just full of surprises.”

The funeral was short and to the point, with the Theurgist being summoned immediately. Susan got a sense that something quite magical was going on as the man prayed over the burning body, and she felt a powerful presence with *Spirit Sense* that faded away as the ceremony ended. It seemed the soul of these people was not released without burning the body, which Susan thought was a bit odd.

What if someone is lost at sea? Or gets lost and dies in the desert? Will their souls never find rest?

But these people knew their craft, and after Illina said a few words over what was left of the body the lid was closed up, the casket lowered, the hole was filled in, and that was that.

“Thank you, for taking care of my mother,” Illina said on the way back to the house.

“It’s okay. This world failed you a little, I’m just glad I could make it right.”

“But what am I going to do?” she asked, pleadingly. “I’m too young to be apprenticed to anyone, and it would be unfair to ask you for more money.”

Apprenticing? Is that what they do around here? No schools, huh? Interesting.

“You must have other family. What about your father, or maybe some grandparents?”

She sadly shook her head. “I never knew my father. Mom wouldn’t talk about him. And my grandparents live a long ways away from here. I don’t know exactly where.”

“I’m sure I could find out. Okay, we’ll head back to your place, gather up anything you want, find out where your grandparents live, and see what we can do to find them.”

“Why?”

“What?”

“Why do this for me? Who are you?”

“I’m the person that’s going to save the world. But I believe in starting small.” She winked.

“Do you have something in your eye?”

“What, people don’t wink around here? Barbarians!”

While Illina gathered up what few belongings she owned, Susan did some casting of the *Question* spell, seeking her grandparents. To the question “where do the grandparents of Illina the Quick live?” she got back

Tintallion

When she asked where in Tintallion they lived she got back

The village of Dawn

“Do you know where Tintallion is?” she asked Illina.

“Up the coast? My mom said she came south when she was a girl.”

“So we’ll have to go by boat, then?”

She nodded.

“Then I guess we need to find the coast.”

“I think it’s... that way?” she pointed.

“Humm. They didn’t before, but no one is going to freak out if I fly up and take a look, are they?”

“I’ve watched wizards in the sky before, it’s no big deal.”

“Then we can know for sure soon.”

After Illina grabbed what she wanted, Susan basically looted the place, figuring as soon as it was known the house was empty, it would be looted anyway.

"You're probably right," agreed Illina. "My mom was renting this place, and with her... gone... it'll need to be rented again."

Susan could only mutely nod, thinking about the bum deal this poor girl got, in a world where gods and magic could be summoned just by walking up the street and paying for them.

As far as the possessions, she could dump the stuff out of her *Dimension* when Illina got to her new home. *At least I know they're still alive. I just hope they agree to take her in. She's family, I can't see why they wouldn't.*

"You use a lot of magic," Illina remarked, after Susan made a wooden crate with *Creation* to hold everything. She then hefted it and shoved it into her *Dimension*. Illina's eyes got wide. "And you're really, really strong!"

"I guess. Is that a problem?"

"My mom always said wizardry was pretty dangerous, that's why it's so expensive. Was she wrong? You don't seem worried."

"Tell you the truth, I have no idea. Look," she spread her arms wide. "You can tell just by looking at me I'm not from around here, right?"

"Yeah, but here in Ethshar of the Rocks we get a lot of travelers. It's a coastal town."

"But I'm guessing never anyone like me. I mean even my hair is different, right?"

She nodded.

"I thought it might be rude to say anything."

Susan snorted. "Well, anyway, I'm from a lot further away than you might guess. That makes my magic different too. Is that okay with you?"

"As long as you don't turn us into frogs or something by messing up a spell, sure."

"I'll try my best. Come on, look one last time, we won't be back here."

She looked sad again. "I know." But she went to look.

After flying up and verifying that yes, this was a coastal town and a ship heading north should be easy to find, the three made their way to the docks. Susan couldn't tell one type of ship from another, but even she could see the difference between a ship loading cargo and a ship loading people.

This place was called "of the rocks" for a reason, the docks were built into the side of the town, which was pretty rocky and high up. Thus, the decks of some of the boats were almost level with the docks, so you could walk straight across rather than up to get to the deck. It was a busy place, and really ships sailing from here only went north or south, so it didn't take long for Susan to find a passenger craft. (With her LUCk check of 23)

"Where ya headed?" asked the man at the top of the gangplank.

"North," replied Susan. "Looking for a place called the Village of Dawn?"

"Yeah, I know it. Pretty far inland, but we can show you the major road leading into Tintallion."

Great. How much?"

"Depends on what level of comfort you want while aboard ship. Five coppers a person gets you a hammock in the hold and some basic food. For a silver piece you get a cabin to yourself and the food's a lot better."

"Humm... what if I wanted the cabin but could take care of my own food?"

"You don't seem to be carrying anything eatable, don't think you can sneak into the galley or anything."

"She's a wizard!" insisted Illina. "She can make food with magic!"

"That so? A wizard, huh?" The man looked her up and down. "Doesn't look like any wizard I've ever seen. Where's the stuff for your spells, then?"

"You let me worry about that."

"Hey, whatever. You want to call yourself a wizard, no skin off my back. You aren't and the guild gets word of it, they'll probably just kill you. Say, ten coppers then?"

"So that's twenty for the both of us? Fine. I only have gold at the moment, can you make change?" She hadn't put the bag of coins away, and got out another to give the man.

“Sure, odd coin though.”

“I travel a lot.”

“Yeah, so do I. Never seen a coin like this.” He seemed to weigh it in his hand, then compared it to one he had in his money pouch. “Seems pretty close, so I guess it’s fine.” He handed her some silver and a few copper coins back. “You can have cabin seven, but I’ll be watching you at mealtimes.”

“Fine.” Susan waved him away, and he stepped out of the way to let her pass. Illina and Sparkle followed.

“Hey wait, this cat yours?” he protested.

“Yeah, what’s the problem?”

He stared down at her. “You’re really taking a cat to sea with you?”

“I really am. That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Whatever. We won’t be held responsible if it jumps overboard though.”

“She won’t.”

“Good ratter?”

“You won’t find a better.” *Given she has human level intelligence and more magic than you’ve ever seen in your life at her command.*

“Fine. Go on then.”

The three went aboard, and Susan asked if Illina wanted to go to the cabin right away or watch the ship pull out of the dock.

“Can we wait? I’ve never been on a boat before!”

“Sure. Uh, by the way, do you know your numbers?”

“Sure, my mother was teaching me.” She looked a bit sad again.

“Okay, because I can’t read your language. You’ll have to point out which cabin is ours. Seven, right?”

She nodded. “You speak really good though.”

“Thank you.” She got down close. “Don’t tell anyone, but that’s actually more magic.”

She grinned back, happy to be let in on the secret, and the three milled about on deck until preparations to leave were done. And by preparations, it was mainly getting enough people to have a full load, and they finally furled the sail and started pulling away from the docks.

Illina was happily waving to the people on the docks as the ship went past, and some waved back with a smile.

“Now what in the world?” Susan was watching as a young woman, traveling bag in hand, was racing down the dock waving her arms and shouting as if that would cause the ship to stop.

“Crazy fool!” remarked the man next to Susan. “Does she think this ship can just- by the gods!”

The woman had gathered herself and *leapt*, and Susan could see she was going to fall far short of the deck and plunge into the sea. She was about to cast *Telekinesis* when the woman’s face screwed up in concentration, and she simply floated the rest of the way, collapsing in a heap and breathing heavily, upon the deck.

Who does that girl think she is, Princess Peach? asked The Darkness. *That was dangerous, she’s no warlock.*

The man who had taken Susan’s money at the dock went over to see what was up, but the woman waved him away, struggling to rise. Susan headed over there to see if there was something she could help with, but stopped when she got in range to hear what the woman was saying.

“Never mind that, there’s something powerfully magic on this ship, I tracked it all over town. It could be extremely dangerous, I have to find it!”

I can’t take you anywhere, complained The Darkness.

Sky of Blue, Sea of Green

Time: A moment later

Place: The Laughing Gull, headed north

Wonder if she's looking for us? The Darkness asked, somewhat amused. *You're pretty magical and dangerous, right? A real magical girl, that's our Susan.*

Hey, why are you being so chatty all of a sudden?

I'm in a good mood for once, that's all. Don't spoil it by getting all... witchy on me.

Witchy, get it?

No.

Ah, you will.

The girl, only somewhat recovered from her exertions getting here, was now stalking about the deck glaring at people. Susan wasn't sure if she should edge out of sight down to the cabins, though she had no idea where the ladder or stairs were. Also there was the possibility that would make her look guilty, moving off so suddenly.

After all, what would a totally innocent person do right now? Oh, I know, lose interest and go back to watching the boats in the harbor, right?

"Well, that was some excitement, wasn't it?" Susan said to Illina, turning back to the railing on the boat.

"Do you think our journey will qualify as an adventure? I've always wanted one."

Susan laughed. "Stick with me, kid, and you'll have all the adventure you could ever want."

"Neat! Hello!"

Hello?

Susan turned to see the woman, having made her way over to them, now staring at them.

"Odd clothes," remarked the woman.

She herself was dressed in the sort of standard fare most woman around here seemed to wear, though of a slightly better quality than most. Both her top and skirt were black, but she had splashes of color little adornments like a brooch and a red cloth tied around her waist so it made a triangle to one side. Then she raised her eyes.

And Susan found herself staring into the biggest, most beautiful pair of sparkling green eyes she had ever seen. Susan had naughty thoughts about taking the owner of these eyes, finding their cabin, and after many, many hours, making sure the person attached to them would be too worn out to move so she could stare into them all she wanted.

The woman suddenly blushed furiously and looked away, but then seemed to think better of it and grabbed her arm. Susan, of course, could have knocked her away easily with her STRength as high as it currently was, but she let the woman lift her arm up and pull up her sleeve. The *Wizard Bracelet* sat there, high on her arm.

"No, that can't be right!" insisted the woman.

"Can I help you?" asked Susan.

The woman ignored her, grabbing the other arm and looking at her charm bracelet. She then stared at Susan's empty palm, where her *Somatic Sword* came out of when she summoned it.

"No, no, impossible!" she woman breathed, dropping her hand and taking a step back.

"What's impossible?" asked Susan with a grin. "You're not making much sense you know."

"And you can't be on this ship!" insisted the man, who had been following her around.

"I'll pay her fare," Susan told him. "That's not a problem."

"The problem is we cast off because we were full! That's what I've been trying to tell her. You know her?"

Susan shook her head. "Never saw her in my life." She didn't add, *and I've only been in this world like an hour or two.*

“Well, if you’re paying her fare then she’s going to be in your cabin. That means you’re sharing a bed.”

“Oh, that’s no trouble,” Susan assured him, thinking about how beautiful the color green was, and how she had never really noticed that before.

“Whatever.” He held his hand out, and Susan reached for her coin bag.

“Wait, I can pay my own way!” said the woman, finally reacting to the man. “You’re really full?”

“We’re really full.”

“I caught that thought earlier, am I going to be safe, sharing a room with you?” she teased.

“Safe? Wait, what do you mean caught that thought? Is that why you blushed like that?”

“I’m a witch,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“Ahem?”

“Insistent, aren’t you? What’s the fare?”

“Depends. Is your new friend here going to provide your food, too?” Susan nodded her head. “Fine. I’ll say eight, as you’re going to be sharing a room, and you’ve already got the kid in with you.”

“Kid?”

“Hi,” Illina said hesitantly, where she had been hiding behind Susan when the woman came over.

“Hello. Is this your daughter?”

“No, I’m just seeing her safely to her grandparent’s house.”

“I feel a lot of pain from her, is she okay?”

“Her mother just died, that’ll take some time.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thanks,” she mumbled.

“I am rather busy,” reminded the man.

“And with a rather one track mind as well. It isn’t like I can go anywhere, man, now is it? I’m on a boat!”

This seemed to give the man pause. “I suppose that’s true.”

“But as you’re so eager for it...” She got out a coin pouch and counted the eight copper pieces into his hand.

“Thank you. Enjoy the voyage.” He walked away muttering about crazy witches.

“Now that he’s finally gone,” said the woman, “what exactly are you?”

“Susan Fel- what did you say?”

“What are you? And don’t try telling me you’re human, because I wouldn’t buy that. I feel the most magical thing *ever* appear in town out of nowhere and start wandering around. Then suddenly it’s back where it was, then it’s moved instantly again. Then it walks back. Then it heads for a ship and I find out it’s you?”

Susan was looking pleased. “I’m really the most magical thing you’ve ever felt?”

“Yes,” she replied suspiciously. “I mean your strength of will and physical strength seem unmatched. That bracelet is unlike any talisman I’ve ever seen. It’s got magic all over it, so does that other weird bracelet you have on, plus there’s something in your hand I’ve never felt before... there’s no way you’re human.”

“I’m actually a little insulted,” said Susan. “I don’t look human enough for you?” She flipped her hair and batted her eyelashes.

“You leave her alone!” shouted Illina. “She helped me when no one else would, and paid for my mom’s funeral, and showed me all sorts of neat magic, and now she’s taking me to the only family I have left. So I don’t care what you say, she’s... she’s...” Illina started to cry again, hugging Susan tight from behind.

“There, there,” said Susan, holding her. “This has all happened rather quickly, hasn’t it? I forget my whirlwind way of doing things is rather hard on most people. Let’s get you to the cabin and my new friend and I can talk, okay? You probably didn’t sleep much last night, did you?”

"She didn't," answered the witch. "And... I'm sorry too, little one. I was just surprised, I didn't realize how special she was to you." Illina just glared at her. "Oh my, I seem to have made a mess of things." She shook her head. "My master would speak to me quite harshly if she saw this."

"Come on." Susan easily hefted Illina and went in search of cabin number seven.

With Illina tucked in and Sparkle at the foot of the bed to watch over her, Susan and the witch went in search of a quiet place to talk.

"So before I answer any of your questions, let's get a few of mine answered," she insisted. "Like who you are, and how you can read my mind." *Without giving me a chance at a RESolve check to keep you out.*

"I'm Sativola of the Sparkling Eyes, which you noticed earlier." She blushed again.

"Yes, rather up close, not that I'm complaining."

"And you really would have, um, taken me to your cabin and, uh, you know?"

"You really can read minds." *And she must have a Magic Sense skill I like do. Nice to finally meet someone I don't have to teach that to.* "I mean, uh, I have someone I'm involved with right now, you just came upon me rather suddenly, so I couldn't help myself. Are you offering? The rest of you is as pretty as your eyes, if I may say so."

She waved her hands. "No, no, I was just, well, I've never thought about being with- can we- I shouldn't have asked..." She trailed off, not sure how to proceed.

"We can just drop it, if you'd rather."

"Oh thank the gods. Not that I think wrongly of that sort of thing, I just never saw myself as-

"Already dropped."

"Right, okay?"

The pair stood in silence for a moment. "So you're a witch then?"

"An apprentice, actually. I'm on a journey to prove I'm ready be called a journeyman now. That's why I ran after that source of- you. That's why I ran after you."

"I hope it goes well for you. Why did you run after me though, I could have been dangerous, like you said!"

"Thank you. My master said I had to do something that elevated the art of witchcraft, or otherwise do something worthy of a story while traveling the world. I thought if I could find the source of that magic..."

"It would qualify. Got it. Hope you're not too disappointed?"

"Oh, I think it might work out. I feel good things around you. Uh, what was your name again? You started to say it..."

"Oh yes. I'm Susan Felton. Nice to meet you."

Sativola looked confused. "Susan... of Felton? I've never heard of that town."

"What, no, that's my-" Susan paused. "Names don't work that way here, do they? Illina was the same way, she said she was 'Illina the Quick.' I was too worried about her mother and her to pay much attention to that. You don't have last names, do you? Just a first name and some kind of descriptor. What an odd custom!"

"Where are you from that you think that's odd?"

"Further away than you can possibly imagine."

"I'm getting a sense of it from your mind, but I can scarcely believe it."

"Don't go too deep, that's a rabbit hole you'll never escape from. Anyway, I guess around here you can call me Susan the Wanderer. I think that'll fit me best."

"You don't mind if I tag along, do you? At least for a little while? A person with as much magic as you do must have some great stories to tell. I bet traveling with you will get me one, too!"

"I suppose it would. I should warn you, being around me will be dangerous. I'm hunting something, and if you think my magic is impressive, well, I've come out on top thus far but this world has me a bit worried."

"This... world?"

"It's a long story."

"Good thing it's a long voyage."

Susan laughed. "I guess so."

And so Susan took a few hours and explained things to her new companion, the almost-but-not-quite witch. She talked about how she was traveling not the world, but between worlds, which Sativola accepted without too much fuss.

"After all," she reasoned, "if wizards can create or travel to other worlds, what's to stop the people on those worlds traveling here?"

How logical. I'm really starting to like this girl.

She talked about The Darkness, which did concern her, and about her magic, which was similar/different to magic that might be found around here.

"Let me see if I understand this," Susan said after getting a short explanation.

"Wizardry is the most flexible, but the most immediately dangerous. Spells require a host of weird ingredients, like baking a magical cake, but the cake can do anything?"

"That's right."

Sounds the most like my magic, but way less convenient. "Then there's your type, witchcraft, which is more emotions, moving things without touching them, limited spells, mind reading, seeing the future, that sort of thing? And of course sensing magic, lies, even auras to an extent."

"Exactly."

So like ESPers, and the elves back home, but either more limited or they just haven't figured out what all they can do yet. Though maybe teleporting is a witch secret they don't share? But the elves fought in defense of the castle, right? If what she says is true, just lifting something with witchcraft is as strain. "Then there's warlocks, who appeared suddenly on this Night of Madness. They can do some of the same things you can, just better, but other things you can do they can't do at all?"

"Right. They can lift more, and heal more, but they can't find missing things or tell the future."

"And they get *stronger* the more magic they use?"

"From what I hear."

That's the opposite of me. Imagine doing a spell and having more energy when you-Vincent and his lightning Materia combo! Is it something like that? Are they drawing energy out of the air, like a Spirit Mage? They just happen to get more than they use? "But it's the most dangerous, long term, because they can hear this *Calling* and head north?"

She nodded. "Where they disappear, forever."

I don't like the sound of that. I've been hearing a voice, and I think The Darkness is talking so much to try and distract me from it.

Like I said, I'm just in a good mood. Can't I be in a good mood once in a while? Why does it have to be this major production that I want to talk a little?

No, you can't! Something important there, but I don't yet know what. "Then sorcery can make talismans? Why couldn't you do something like that? You have magic."

"I probably could, if I wanted to study how. But the wizard's rules are absolute. One type of magic to a person. If you have magic you can't be in government, because that's equivalent to magic in their eyes."

"I suppose." *Natural Magician is four points, I suppose being a ruler of a small city would be worth that, at least.* "And the various others like praying to gods, summoning demons, and people who are just faking it."

"That about covers it!"

I hope the wizard's guild doesn't have a problem with me. I can do just about anything these people can do, and she didn't mention Fabrication. It's almost like my magic got smeared across the whole range of magic using types, so as to keep any one person from... well, becoming me, if I want to be totally honest with myself. I guess I could see the wizard's point. They aren't traveling worlds, what would they need with different types of magic? Plus, they don't have XP like I do, they have to actually practice. Learning just what they learn takes years, if they learned both Wizardry and making talismans, each would suffer, they

wouldn't be as good at either. They can't make up the difference with energy like I can, I bet.

"So, that's the story. If you're willing to help me on this world, keep me from making a fool of myself maybe, you're welcome to tag along."

"Oh yeah," she said emphatically. "If I can't make or discover some elevation of witchcraft, or live a good story following you around I *never* will."

"Elevation of witchcraft, huh?" Susan did a quick *Augment Skill* and then *Dimension Sense*, getting a twelve (one from minimum). Still, enough to determine she felt like she belonged here. "Give this a shot." She handed over her bracelet, and Sativola took it hesitantly.

"What am I supposed to do with... what's a health level? And why do you have ten of it?"

"Never mind that. Just try levitating that box over there."

"Okay?" She stared at it and it rose a little, but not enough to attract attention. "Hey, it seems easier than ever! What is this, exactly?"

"Thought so." She held her hand out and got it back, shoving it back up her arm. "Witchcraft really is tied to your body, isn't it? In that case, I can elevate your art here and now with some simple advice."

"Really? What is it?"

"Exercise."

"Do what now? I don't know that word, I don't even recognize the sound of the language it comes from. I can see in your mind what you mean but I can't be seeing that right."

"I think you are. Ditch the skirt and run a couple of miles every day. Lift weights. Do sit ups. The more you build up your body, the easier witchcraft is going to be, right? And of two equally trained witches, which will be able to do more magic, easier? The one with poor diet, who just sits around, or the one that eats right and has strengthened their body?"

"But I can't wear men's... clothes..." She looked Susan up and down again. "Oh."

"Starting to understand, huh? You can't fight the monsters of the world dressed up for going to a ball. If you're serious about your craft you'll practice it, right? But there's only so much practice can do if your body can't keep up. I proved that with my bracelet. When you got super strong, your witchcraft got super easy."

"Witches are trained to recognize the truth, I suppose I have to recognize it within your words, as well."

"That's the spirit."

"But to wear breeches, like a man!?" The very idea seemed scandalous to her.

"Oh, it's worse than that. Come with me."

Back in the cabin, Susan ordered her to stip.

"What are you going to do?"

"Make you some exercise clothes. Don't worry, I'm not going to ravish you or anything."

She reluctantly started getting undressed, (which didn't take long, she wasn't wearing a heck of a lot. Cloth was expensive, and it seemed bras hadn't been invented here, or weren't the style or whatever) while Susan focused on *Creation*. Two castings later, and she had a pair of stretchy garments, not unlike the outfit she had made to sneak around in on Louise's world. Just... less.

"Okay, put these on."

"I can't wear that, especially not in public! There's more of me left uncovered than covered!"

Susan sighed. "Yes, that's the point. Look, when you're running around you get hot, right?"

"Yes," she slowly admitted.

"This will help keep you cool. Running about in anything but this will get you overheated, it's not good for you. Now this is just a pattern, basically, because I can only make one kind of material per casting of the spell, and you don't have this kind of stretchy fabric I'm guessing?" Sativola shook her head. "So have something like this made, only with buttons and things, that fits you. But for now, try them on, see how they feel."

“Scandalous!” she squealed, after slipping them on. “You want me to get up, put something like this on, and then run about the city? Are you mad?”

No, but I am jelly, she is looking fine. “Ahem. No, I’m not. Look, you must know other witches your age, right?”

“Some, I guess?”

“Get together and all run at the same time. In a group it won’t seem so odd, and no one person will stand out. After a while, people will stop caring. ‘Oh, it’s the witches out for their morning jog.’ People will understand why you’re doing it, and soon no one will look at you twice.”

“I suppose that could happen...”

“Trust me, the odd becomes normal for people pretty quickly.”

“I’m changing back.”

“Oh, no you’re not. This is a great start.”

“What?” she squeaked.

“There’s not that many people around, it’s isolated, perfect for you to get used to wearing it. I’ll make you some pants so you can get used to wearing them, too. But for now, I’ll make myself a set and we’ll go up on deck and I can show you some exercises to start practicing.”

“What? Now?”

“Of course now. Why not now? You have something better to do?”

“Can I come too?” asked Illina, smiling at them. “It sounds like fun!”

“Fun?” squealed Sativola.

“Yeah!”

“Okay then, two more sets. I’ll get to work.”

“Yay!” shouted Illina, throwing off her top. “I get new clothes too!”

“This’ll end in disaster...” Sativola predicted.

But it didn’t.

The sailors stared openly, and many people came up from below to see what the commotion was about, but the three did various exercises so Sativola could get used to them and see which she liked best. Many of the kids (being bored to tears by that time) also joined in, working out some of their energy, much to the relief of their parents. Susan showed them some games like hopscotch and double dutch and made them some bouncy balls, jacks, simple wooden tops or other toys, and anything else she could think of like hoops and chalk with magic, and they played until it got too dark. She then made “fairies” dance, which was just the *light* spell, cast in several places at once and with a different color light for each, and then made to flit about. The kids loved her, and they all wanted to play again the next day, and Susan said they could, she would like that too.

Many parents came up and thanked her, or made sure she didn’t mind watching them. They were quite grateful for the break, and curious about the strange clothes the three were wearing. She explained they were all witches trying a new training exercise, and they all nodded appreciably.

“Oh, magic,” said most. “Nice to know there’s some magic users on board if something happens.”

Susan got the impression that they knew magic existed, but weren’t sure exactly what it could do or how it worked. She figured she could get away with running around naked if she told them it was for some vague “magical” reason.

That evening, the three recovered in the cabin, munching food created by Susan’s magic. *Never got this low on energy just from making simple toys for kids, before. It’s always been either a fight for my life or making Spell Papers. Somehow this seems more satisfying.*

She also gave Sativola’s abilities a complete run down. Like she could ignite something, could she do the opposite and freeze something? She could hear thoughts, could she project them? She could lift something, could she tear it apart? Most of what Susan

suggested witches had never even considered doing, and Sativola was surprised to find she could do several of the things that were suggested. She was shocked at just what could be possible, and knew just this information, brought back to her master, would qualify her to be a full witch. She sat, stunned, and wondered what other surprises traveling with this strange, otherworldly girl might bring.

She wasn't even thinking about her bare legs and midriff anymore, having forgotten to change back after they returned. (Just as Susan intended. Not only for herself, but so that Sativola got enough courage to wear it in the city too.)

By the time they fell into bed together, all three were somewhat exhausted. Susan had made an extension out of wood so the bed was bigger, and a memory foam mattress so it was nice and soft. The three fell asleep with something they hadn't expected to find only hours ago.

Friends.

Yo Ho Ho!

Time: Two days later

Place: Aboard ship

And so, Susan and her new friend Sativola, and her new charge Illina, sailed the open seas. In fact they didn't get that far away from the coast, but stopped at various towns along the way to drop off and pick people up. Susan spent time watching over the kids with the help of the available parents, making replacement *Alleviation Spell Papers* to replace the ones she gave Nita, and working with Sativola to expand her set of abilities. Finally having a free moment she also asked *Question* to see if Luna was around anywhere, and got a no answer as she feared.

"I didn't expect to," she told Sparkle. "After all, it's only been a couple of worlds, and even with my better LUCk, it's a complete long shot where she ended up."

Plus the story would be over if you completed your objectives... "You're not going to give up, right?"

"Give up? I don't even know the meaning of the words."

Both her new friends knew about Sparkle talking by this time, and the captain found half a dozen dead rodent heads in front of his door, so he wasn't about to complain about her presence. Everyone was amazed by how "tame" she was, getting petted, everyone remarking "it's almost like she understands me!"

Illina was looking and feeling better, having been hit with the knife and getting something resembling a proper diet for the first time in her life. She was having a grand time, just playing with the other kids and running about the ship, though she still seemed sad sometimes. She wasn't the only one, and both Susan and Sativola worked their way through the ship's population, providing what cures and advice they could, as a "wizard" and a witch, respectively. It was actually somewhat easier here, as people expected a wizard to be waving a knife about, and few had seen enough wizardry to think it strange she wasn't flinging bat's blood and the scales of a fish to work her "healing magic." She just did some mumbo-jumbo, cast a grade zero spell to provide some flashy lights for effect, and stuck them with the tip of the knife.

Worked every time.

Illina was very interested in magic, but Susan was hesitant to tell her about her own, seeing as she could never learn any of it. She suggested keeping a close eye on Sativola, being as she could easily apprentice to a witch. She had the *spark of magic*, in fact at least a third of the people on the ship did, which astonished her.

Oh sure, my mother said every other person on my father's world was a wizard, a cyborg, an ESPer, or some kind of martial arts master. But given how many people here could work magic, it's astonishing to me they don't.

"Not everyone can afford it," Sativola explained when she asked about it. "Being apprenticed to a master is expensive, magic doubly so. You can't just pick up some magical tricks or anything, either. You get taken in by a group, like the wizard's guild or the council of warlocks (or my own sisterhood) or nothing. The wizard's guild accepts nothing less, (despite it being none of their business, really.) It's almost impossible to do wizardry without learning from a master, and while a really good witch might work a few things out, what's the point? It tires you out same as doing whatever you're trying to do manually, so you might just as well do that. Plus there's only so many people in the world willing to train young people, despite the basically free labor they provide. So it's not that hard to understand."

Sure, from a certain point of view. But it's magic! I can't believe even wizards wouldn't want there to be all the wizards there could possibly be in the world, given how useful magic is. It can't be all that dangerous, right?

It was the afternoon of the second day when the other ship was sighted and the crew started running about frantically. Susan wasn't sure what this ship being nearby was all about,

they had passed ships and been passed by ships for two days now. But it was worrisome, this ship seemed to be heading straight for them.

"Pirates," spat Sativola, standing with her by the ship's railing. "This isn't good."

"No, it's excellent, I need the XP." Susan was rubbing her hands together in anticipation. *I figured I wouldn't get any until I got to where we were going, so bandits could attack me or something. I should have realized the world wouldn't wait.*

"Are you crazy? Those men over there are killers! They won't think twice about... what's XP?"

"Never mind. The better question is; most of these people are poor, what do they expect to get out of attacking us?"

"They don't know that. We could be carrying something good."

"True. Tell me, how are you in a fight? Any experience?"

"Who, me? None at all! Witches don't get into fights, we can feel the pain of our opponents!"

"Ah, pity. I could think of some uses for telekinesis in fight, like animating swords. You get to stay out of harm's way but they still have to fend off a blade. Much easier than trying to throw them. Or using your ability to read thought to anticipate someone and throw them off."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Look, take the kids and go below. If any slip by me, I'm counting on you to delay them until I can... actually, Sparkle?"

"Yeah?"

"She might need your help more than me. Would you mind going with her?"

"I'm your *companion*, but I don't think a bunch of pirates will be any threat to you at all."

"I'm thinking no. They don't even have gunpowder here that I can tell. Not that bullets would even really hurt me. The hardest part will be not just killing them all instantly."

"You aren't thinking of taking an entire ship full of pirates *by yourself* are you?" she nearly screamed.

"Of course. Sativola, please understand, this is what I do. Now, would this ship have been attacked if I wasn't here? I have no idea. But it is, and it's my responsibility to make sure this ship stays safe. Now go, take Illina and-."

"I want to watch!" insisted Illina.

"No, go below with Sativola."

"Please!"

"No."

"Please!!"

Susan looked into her pleading eyes. "Oh very well." She looked around the deck, and her eyes fell upon the boxes that Sativola had been practicing her magic on. They were pretty heavy, and stacked up. "Come on." She shifted them and let Illina get behind them, then closed the gap up again. "Can you see?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Stay there. You get traumatized by seeing someone's head get lopped off and I'm not to blame, you hear me?"

"What's tamurt- what's trawert- what's that word you said?"

"Bad dreams. If you have bad dreams because of this I'll only say I told you so."

"Okay."

Oh well, it's not like I planned to kill any of them anyway..

"You have to kill them!" insisted Sativola, picking up on that thought. "They're pirates!"

"They're still people. I would have thought a witch would understand that much. Anyway, get those kids below, and try to calm everyone down. Tell them a wizard is defending the ship, they've seen me use magic, that should put their minds at ease."

"I'll try. Come along kids!" she shouted. "Clear this deck!"

Sparkle cast *Acceleration* on Susan and walked down with Sativola, herding frightened children down to the lower deck.

"You will stand with us, wizard?" asked the captain, walking up with sword in hand. "I must say, I'm surprised."

“Actually, if you could take your men below decks, they won’t get in my way.”

“Bold words,” he said at last. “You are a strange one, with your leaping about and wearing strange clothes. You befriend children, you help the crew and display unheard of strength, you entertain with magic. Can you fight as well as all that?”

Susan giggled. “I think you’ll find that I can.”

The man glanced at her, not willing to take his eyes off the pirate ship for long, which was almost upon them. “If you say so. I have seen your magic, but not any of the usual paraphernalia of wizardry. You haven’t even drawn your knife. Are you so confident in your magic, then?”

“I am.”

“So be it. Far be it from me to send away a wizard, even one as young and female as yourself. I will be in your debt if you can save my craft and my passengers.”

“No worries, captain, you will sail unhindered before long.”

After all, these people don’t have cannons. They can’t exactly sink this ship, they’ll just swing over here and harass the place. Do a bit of strutting around, look menacing, and maybe haul off some ‘booty.’ At least that’s what they would have done- they won’t be expecting me.

The ships collided with a crash, and Susan was sure that if her hearing was better, she would be able to hear the panicked cries of the people below.

Here we go. “Augment Skill,” she said, activating the Spell Symbol on her bracelet for Martial Arts. After all, if I use the sword I might actually kill them by accident, swinging it around. Let’s drive these guys off this ship without killing any of them. They should be able to swim, if I throw them overboard, right?

It would be faster just to Slash-All them though, right? asked The Darkness. These guys aren’t made of stone. One punch and it’s all over for them. I mean, someone on their side could get a lucky hit in and kill someone over here. How would you feel about that, an honest man, a sailor, dying because you couldn’t kill a pirate?

I’m going to be fighting flashy enough that I hope they try taking me out first. I’m right near the other ship, they have to come this direction anyway. It’s something to consider though, how do I weigh one life against another?

And then there was no time for more debate. Three pirates jumped from the other ship, landing before her, and Susan gave them a quick bow. Then she burst forward, taking her two meters of free movement and doing a *Pushback maneuver*, striking the one in front of her with an open hand- not for damage, but simply to push them back over the edge of the railing. She got a seventeen to hit, he got a sixteen to dodge, so she hit him. They made opposed STrength checks, thirty two (her maximum) to eighteen, and the pirate went flying back fourteen meters off the ship.

The two pirates to either side gaped at her, unbelieving.

“Next?” Susan chirped happily. *Still, guess that rule breaks down for someone like me. How can I shove someone fourteen meters back and not have them take damage? I guess he’ll take some from the fall...*

Both raised their swords and shouted a battle cry.

Pirate “three” was .2 seconds faster than his companion pirate “two” so he brought his sword down to slash Susan to ribbons. He didn’t expect Susan to make a called shot to the blade as a parry and try catching the thing in her bare hand. But that’s what she did.

Her nineteen beat his fourteen, and the blade slammed into her hand, doing one damage to her. The pirate just had time to think *this girl must be nuts*, before her off hand action of nineteen swept him off the deck just as easily as his fellow pirate before him. He went tumbling twenty meters (or so) before plunking into the watery depths.

Pirate “two” was already committed to his action, and Susan took another reactive “parry” to catch the sword, which missed by five, astonishing her. The blade slashed across her face, catching her right in the jaw.

“Ow!” she said, as a faint scratch appeared. “Not the face!”

The pirate grinned, but Susan again used her left hand to grab his clothes and haul him

overboard. She got minimum on that check, and the pirate danced back out of her way as he got maximum. "You won't get me that way, girly!" said the pirate, coming in for another slash.

Then I'll get you another. "Thrust!" she cast reactively, throwing some energy in and relying on her bonus from the *Acceleration* spell. She shouldn't have bothered, he couldn't make the STrength check to resist because he was hitting her, one damage to the body. He also flew overboard, leaving her with no one to fight at the moment. Two pirates jumped down from the forecastle, eying her warily.

Can't use Thrust on them until I get to the other side there. They'd smash into the wall behind them if I used it from here.

"I don't know what you did, but you'll pay for it!" shouted one, as both ran towards her.

Susan stayed put, letting them come to her. That brought it back to her action just as they got near enough, letting her do a *Martial Arts* attack to touch the closest one. She grabbed him a thirty one, beating his dodge by eight. She got ready to make a *Wrestling* check to toss him to her right and off the boat.

From behind, a pirate that she hadn't seen swung his blade with all his might, making a called shot to the neck. This did another one damage, and stopped the blade cold.

"One second, guy," she said, turning her head just enough to spot him. "Let me throw this trash over first."

"What are you?" he asked, staring at her in disbelief.

"I'm the wizard protecting this boat."

"Wizard!?"

Pirate "five" and her now went, and her action was to make her check to throw him off. He was assisted by "five" who rather than slashing, tried to break her grip on his friend.

It was still twenty eight to twenty two, and pirate "four" went sailing overboard as she spun and tossed.

"Now then," said Susan, grabbing for the one that tried to decapitate her. Ties go to the defender, so "six" dodged out of the way. "My goodness you guys are squirmy!"

"We need some help over here!" shouted the one that was now behind her.

Excellent, exactly as I intended. You guys focus on me and not the people that can actually get killed by those puny "swords" of yours.

Another two pirates dropped from the forecastle, swords at the ready.

Susan stepped right, getting to the side of pirate "six" so she could make a straight line *pushback* again, and got in close to shove him. She got minimum again, and the pirate dodged out of the way. She felt another blow hit her body as the pirate now behind her tried to stab her in the back.

Dang it, one more and I'm at a penalty. Even moving this fast, they can wear me down I guess. Time to start throwing energy into my attacks? I wanted to try it without, but even with a fifteen skill rating, these guys are still dodging me. Susan lunged at him again, this time throwing energy into COOrdination, getting a twenty four and missing by two. *Oh come on! That was a COOrdination of at least ten plus a skill of fifteen. They can't even spend that much energy, how are they getting away from me? Ugh, those other two guys will be over here in a second, I have to take this guy out!*

Wait a second, I'm dumb. This place has two moons, just like that world Louise lived on! What's with primarily magic worlds having two moons anyway?

"*Dazzle!*" she cast, putting in maximum energy and targeting all four of the men.

All four failed to resist, and magical light staggered all of them. Blinking and trying to figure out what had just happened, pirate "six" had no chance to avoid Susan's strike and went flying.

He was swiftly followed by the other three, and Susan hoped the *Dazzle* wore off before they hit the water. *Still, swimming checks are an active action, so I'm sure they'll be fine.*

By this time the crew members had joined Susan's side, but realized they were totally unnecessary, as there were currently no pirates to drive off.

“Uhm-” started the captain.

He was interrupted by someone hopping up on the railing and looking down at them all. He was dressed better, with cleaner clothes and real leather boots. His pants were black, and he had on a white top with puffy sleeves and a red vest. Golden chains hung from his neck, and rings glittered from his fingers. *All the spoils of his piracy, no doubt.* He had a mighty beard, and a fine blade hung at his side.

“It is a girl!” he said astonished, doffing his hat in Susan’s direction. “I saw my men being scattered like tenpins, but I never could have dreamed such a beauty could be responsible.”

As if. My LOOKs are only a five, so don’t give me any of that crap. I know for a fact I’m only average looking.

“You’re the captain?” she shouted up at him.

“Galvyn the Bold,” he introduced himself with a bow. “Captain of the Raccoon’s Hand, at your service.”

“Great. Retrieve your men, leave us in peace, and I won’t do to you what I did to them.”

“I beg your pardon, is it not customary to return a name for a name?”

“Susan the Wanderer. Happy? Now get out of here. You will take no plunder from aboard this ship, not while I stand upon her deck.”

“Her manners are as blunt as her fists, I see. Very well, I shall take the ship myself, after I show you how a real man handles a sword!”

Oh, come on! Seriously? Where is he getting these lines from?

And down he jumped, lightly rolling out of the fall and drawing his sword.

“Are you sure you won’t take a sword?” asked the captain, holding his out.

“Shouldn’t the two captains of the ships have it out?” Susan asked.

“Normally, I guess we would? But you did offer to defend the ship...”

Susan sighed. “I suppose so. Come on then, Galvyn the Empty Headed, and I’ll toss you overboard as I did your fellows.”

“I highly doubt it. Have at you!” He charged, and Susan rolled her eyes, intending to catch his sword hand as he swung, saving herself the one point of damage. It didn’t go so well as when she went to make the check against him, both were violently shoved away from each other as a sheet of flame erupted between them. This flame wrapped around the man protectively, and the captain ran screaming from the scene, yelling about abandoning the craft which he logically believed was in serious danger of burning to ashes. His crew also reacted rather poorly, one of them shouting about wizard’s spells going out of control, but Susan knew this had nothing to do with her. She watched.

The fire gathered in front of the man and began to coalesce into the shape of a man holding a large, curved blade. When the fire and energy was gone the giant beast like man looked down at Susan with contempt.

“Who dares threaten my master?” it demanded.

After bellowing his demand to know who threatened his master, the giant figure looked around puzzled. Susan took a moment to look it over, and assess the situation as only a *Paragon* can.

The creature was easily a +1 size modifier larger than she herself was, and she could feel heat and energy radiating out from it unchecked. Her *Spirit Sense* was buzzing, *this thing has several times the amount of energy I do!* It stood, confident, the sword held loosely in its right hand. Horns poked out of the top of the turban it wore, and she could see it had twenty six lethal health to lose and ten more before it would be dead.

Not a boss type then, but still it could be a problem. I have no idea what it can do or how well it can fight.

Nearby rope and canvas burst into flames, causing the crew to freak out even more.

"I see my arrival has scattered most, are you simply rooted to the spot in fear, little one?" he asked Susan. "If you retreat now, I'll spare- wait a moment." The creature bent forward, looking her over, and his eyes widened.

"Master!" he shouted, turning. "You must retreat! Never before have I felt such- eh?" The pirate, all bluster and swagger gone, was now trying to scramble backwards away from the figure, but couldn't because his back was already pressed into the side of the ship. "You are not my master, where am I?" asked the figure, looking around again. "A ship? Why am I on a ship? Where is my master, what have you done with him?" he demanded.

"Don't hurt me!" pleaded the pirate. "I'll do anything, give you whatever you want! Please don't hurt me!"

"Bah, spineless. But you-" He turned back to Susan. "You seem quite composed. What transpires here?"

Susan shrugged. "Don't look at me. That man over there was going to show me 'how a real man uses a sword' and plunder this vessel. When I went to smack him, you came out."

"He does wear my master's talisman, that much is plain. But where is my master, Hefeydd the Sorcerer?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know that name." *Not that someone else might, I've only just gotten here.*

"He was a rather minor sorcerer, I admit, but with enough contacts to have a demonologist summon me, and with skill enough to bind me into the talisman." He sighed. "Looks like the fool either died or took it off long enough for it to be stolen. Pity."

"So I guess you're free now, right?"

The demon looked down at her incredulously for a moment, then began to laugh. "Oh, if only that were so! No, I am bound to protect the holder of the talisman, curse my luck."

"Kill- kill her!" Screamed the pirate, pointing at Susan. "I... I... I command it!"

"Quiet, little man!" chastised the demon. "I am to protect you, true, but thus far this girl is not threatening you at all. Allow us our moment to converse."

"You really have to protect me?" asked the pirate, calming down.

The demon's eye twitched with displeasure. "Despite my feelings on the matter, yes. Were it up to me I would simply wave a hand, reduce this ship to ashes and... be stuck out in the water here possibly miles from-" It raised up a bit, obviously able to fly under its own power, and looked around. "Ah, I see land. I would make for the nearest town and all would know my power and splendor!" He touched down on the deck again.

The pirate seemed to have lost most of his fear by now. "Which one is it?" he asked excitedly, holding up his many necklaces.

"Which do you think, fool!" he roared, and Susan had to admit, the one with the big, glowing blue stone in the middle was pretty much a dead giveaway.

“Oh, right. Imagine, I had something like this at my command, and never- wait a second, I’ve had this one for years! Why haven’t you come out before now?”

“You think to chastise me?” As he roared this, he lifted his sword and flames blazed from it. The man flinched back, cowed for the moment.

“It is an interesting question,” admitted Susan, “I mean I can see why you came out against me...”

“And the longer I stand here, the less I wish to face you,” admitted the demon. “But the truth of the matter is, I never felt he was in danger before now, and so I was not released from my prison.”

“Ah.”

“We’ll leave!” said the pirate instantly. “You said we could go, right? I could collect my men and depart? You said that!”

“That was before I knew you were carrying this fire demon or... whatever- no disrespect intended, you are a fire demon, yes?”

“I am.”

“Ah, thank you. As I was saying, carrying a fire demon around with you. That seems a little too dangerous to leave in the hands of a pirate.”

“You can’t take it, he’ll stop you!” He gripped the talisman tightly now, fingers going white about it.

Susan glanced over to the demon, then back. “No offense again, but he couldn’t take me.”

“None taken,” growled the demon.

“What? You’re insane! His sword alone is as big as you are!”

“What difference does that make?” She turned back to the demon. “Look, how you would feel about passing into my service instead, Mr. Fire Demon?”

“My name is Fearghus the Ifrit, and mind your manners, human! You may radiate power and magic above most other humans but *so do I*. Your victory in combat would not be assured.”

“Fearghus then. What do you say to my offer?”

The demon went from angry to considering again. “Hummm, you seem strong, I would never see the light of day again. Galling as this service is, at least I do see some sort of action now and again.”

“What if I offered you your freedom?”

“Free- a demon?” Both the pirate and Fearghus said this, then glanced at the other, surprised to be mirroring each other.

Susan raised a hand, palm up, having caught the gesture from the others aboard ship the last few days. “You seem a decent enough sort. Don’t you want to go home?”

“To Hell? Huh, that’s a tough one.” He stuck the point of his sword down into the deck and leaned on it, pondering for a moment. “Continued servitude to a human or returning in disgrace to my home, after what can only be hundreds of years, freed by a mere girl. No offense.”

“I deserved that one, none taken.”

By this time, the crew had realized their ship wasn’t going to burn down, and were edging closer to see what was going on. Some were beating on fires that stubbornly refused to go out.

“Has it been so long?” she asked.

“I don’t really feel the passage of time while in the talisman, so it is difficult to be sure. When did the war end?”

“The Great War? Two or three hundred years ago.” ventured one of the sailors.

“There you are then.”

Note to self, look into ‘Great War’ sometime. “I see. Well, my offer stands.”

The Ifrit shook his head. “I’m not even sure I can be freed, now. Defeating me simply means I return to the talisman to heal. Breaking it... might destroy me completely. Even I do not crave non-existence.”

“What about summoning you out, then breaking it? You wouldn’t be able to return at that point.”

"I do not know. My essence is within, you would have to ask a sorcerer."

"I guess I will, once I get it away from... what did you say your name was, again?"

Both looked over at the pirate. "She plans to... to hurt me and take the talisman," he said, getting up but with it still gripped tightly in one hand. "Defend me, demon!"

The demon sighed, yanking his sword back out of the deck. "I suppose I must."

"And I must defeat you, and take that talisman before it falls into even worse hands than his. You're sure you won't die if slain?"

"You think it shall be so easy?" he asked, blade igniting again. "I feel your power but mine is also not to be trifled with. Do not get above yourself, little human!"

"Fair enough," remarked Susan, raising a hand. "Blade."

Her *Crystal Sword* appeared, the one damage to her hand hardly seeming to matter now, as she grew in size to match the Ifrit as *Avatar of War* once again took hold of her.

The crew members scattered again, terrified. Even the pirate looked about ready to faint away, slumping down again and trying to escape notice by the two towering figures that now began slowly circling each other.

"I knew I felt fire in you," said the Ifrit. "We are almost kin, you and I, did you not feel it? Both, I think, called into a service we didn't ask for, but are now powerless to escape."

Susan had to admit he had a point. *All I wanted to do was find my father. But now I have to travel all these worlds and look for Luna, fighting The Darkness every step of the way. It's fine, but what if I never find her? When do I give up? When do I put my own needs above hers?*

Now you're thinking like you should, remarked The Darkness. *I certainly won't berate you if you decide to give up.*

Now I know I'm making the right choice. Now be quiet, I have an Ifrit to beat up. Fine, fine.

The two continued to circle, Susan holding her action to see what the demon would do. She had her back to the boxes when Illina suddenly screamed, and Susan whirled. One of the boxes she was hiding behind was barreling straight towards her! She made a *Martial Arts* check with her left hand, getting maximum. However, she knew that was not enough and the box was going to slam into her.

I declare the use of card four, I Don't Think So! she hastily thought, realizing suddenly she had two cards to work with. This forced reality into a new configuration, making the demon make his *Telekinesis* check again. This time he got less, and Susan's mauled fist slammed into the box, doing twenty one damage to the crate. As the crate had a *DC* of only 18, it smashed to pieces, and Illina flinched away from the debris. This also caused the contents of the crate, various bits of cloth and bottles of perfume, to go spilling out and smash against her armor. This didn't hurt, but getting herself untangled from it all cost her precious *segments*.

It seemed she was still going next, and took a swing at the demon with her blade, fully realizing this thing was probably immune to the fire. But it wasn't immune to being chopped to bits, if she could hit him.

She didn't.

He sailed over her strike, flipping over and landing amid the boxes that still partially hid Illina. She screamed again.

"What's this little morsel?" the demon asked, reaching for her. With nowhere to go, he easily plucked her up and grabbed her in a beefy arm, holding his blade to her throat. Illina went stiff, terrified.

"Don't you dare," growled Susan, wishing now she had saved before the pirates had come over. *But you didn't expect anything but pirates, did you, Susan?* she berated herself. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

In the timeless space between actions, Susan considered her options. The demon had just acted, seemingly twice, dodging and then scooping up Illina. As she was *Accelerated* this demon was either very quick, or spending XP for extra actions. So she should get the next action, because he had just gone. *I could use Transposition, but he'd just grab her up again.*

Immobilize is out, I don't want him holding onto her tighter. Fire magic won't work, I hate to knock her out too with Elemental Burst: Knockout, and even Dazzled the slightest movement of his hand will chop her head off! Don't know how smart he is, trying Hypnotic Pattern might spook him too, that's seven segments, or a pretty hefty penalty. I have no ideas...

"This is between you and me," she said to him. "Don't lower yourself by taking hostages." She held her action to see what he would do, hoping he might take the bait.

"It's a fight, anything goes if you want to win. Now, the morsel and I are going to take a little trip, okay? Servants of fire, I summon thee!" As he said the last, he rose into the air again, taking his free movement as part of another action.

What?

Beside Susan, two creatures, seemingly made of fire, appeared, and made a grab for her. They were as big as she was, and grinned in a most distressing manner as they lunged for her. She wasn't sure what capabilities these new creatures had, so she dodged out of the way, away from both of them. Thanks to *Acceleration* she managed it, and the two closed around nothing but empty air. Susan raised her sword as they turned their heads towards her.

She swung, not doing a called shot, and getting an eighteen (her maximum for that roll). The one she swung against deftly dodged, so she swung again. Again her opponent deftly weaved out of the way, letting her hit nothing but air.

She also got pounded on from above, the Ifrit was shooting fire at her out of his sword. This of course didn't hurt her in the slightest, but did do sixteen damage to the deck beneath her feet in a circle around her. This was just enough, (and Susan was pretty heavy at the moment, being +1 size herself) that she went crashing into the deck below.

The Ifrit laughed uproariously at this.

Susan, meanwhile, made her *Martial Arts* check to stand in one action, and then made a *Jumping* check to get back up on deck. She easily cleared the hole and brought her sword up again.

Against a dozen or more of the creatures.

Oh come on! She was about to activate her *Slash-All Materia* with energy, but then realized the demon would be hit too. *And if I accidentally take him out, Illina will fall from wherever she is right now, and even with Acceleration, do I want to take the chance I can't catch her? She probably wouldn't die instantly even if she hit her head, but how can I risk it? I don't have any skill at Catching.*

She raised her sword, about to swing at the nearest fire creature when she suddenly made a *Perception Check*, getting a seventeen. She noticed that only two of the creatures had health information above their heads.

So either they called a bunch of boss level monsters, or this is some kind of trick to throw me off. Well, two can play at that game, right?

"Dazzle!" she cast instead of swinging, targeting the two "real" ones she saw.

One staggered, one did not. She made a *LUCK Check*, getting a twenty five, and sure enough the one controlling the *Illusions* was the one that failed to resist. It went slack, and the other monsters vanished.

Score one for the good guys.

Susan darted forward, knowing this was her best chance to take it out, and did a called shot to the body of the thing. She plunged her sword into it, but somehow, impossibly, it managed to dodge. (Even without the called shot, ties go to the defender!)

With a yell of frustration, Susan used her *Off Hand* to punch the thing, not caring it did slightly less damage.

You would think a sword would do massive amounts of damage, but no, hitting this thing with my fist is 96% the same as hitting it with the sword. I guess it's a TR thing, the sword still has a higher OTR than my fist.

She connected and did twenty three... non-lethal damage to it. It looked at her as if to say "is that all you've got?"

She could have screamed in frustration. *Right, that's why the sword. The OTR*

increase.

The other creature now moved, trying to get behind her in some kind of grab.

Susan, realizing this is what the thing was going for, let it. It touched her.

This brought her back to her action, and the two made opposed *Wrestling* checks to see who would be controlling who.

It was thirty two to forty two, and Susan was down to less than half energy. As Susan got to decide what she wanted to do with the creature, she chose throwing him overboard, figuring that would give her some breathing room.

The creature went sailing over the side of the ship, and a few seconds later, plunked into the water below.

At least it can't fly as well.

"And now for you," she said, somewhat mollified. She did another called shot to the body, swinging two handed and putting energy into COOrdination. This did twenty six damage to the creature, biting in and sticking, even as the thing tried to pull away. Susan could see the thing had thirty two health to lose before dropping, and figured she could easily do another six damage on her next action.

If she hadn't needed to blast fire up at the demon, who was again trying to at least drop her down to the lower deck by shooting fire with his sword. She didn't even bother putting extra energy in, just knocked his fire aside with her own, while careful to avoid hitting him and put Illina in danger. (She got an eleven on *Magic Combat* to perform this maneuver.)

With that she turned her attention back to the creature. Not even bothering to put her other hand back on the blade, she ripped it through the creature, tearing it in half and making it disappear.

"I still have your little friend!" the demon called down to her as she looked around for him. Oddly, Illina wasn't struggling anymore, and seemed frozen in his arm. The blade was once again against her neck.

"Not for long," Susan muttered, and prepared to cast. She knew magical energy would surround Illina, making the already jumpy demon probably slice her head off, so she cast *Transposition* instantly, figuring her bonus from *Acceleration* and energy would make up any difference. She got a twenty one, and found herself in the position Illina had been in, with her safely on the ground. She made a STRength check to burst free, getting a thirty four and turning in mid-air to chop into the demon. The surprised demon tried to parry, but the blades just touched, and Susan drew a deep slash across the Ifrit's body.

Of course, this meant she was now falling, but that was easily taken care of; she cast *Flight* as her next action, catching herself in mid-air, and spinning back to the demon. It was badly hurt, sword up in a guard position.

"He's getting away you know," it said, pointing down with a finger.

Probably a trick, but can he really hurt me? She glanced over, then did a double take—the pirate ship was in fact pulling away from the Laughing Gull! *He must have turned tail and ran while I was distracted fighting the creatures!* "You've got to be kidding me!" she screamed to no one in particular, and tried to estimate how far away it was with another *Magic Combat* check. She was off by eight meters, even if she didn't know it, but that was still enough to tell her she was out of range of M distance spells at this point. At least, if she didn't spend most of her remaining energy to pump up her rating in the skill, at least.

"Stay here," she growled, figuring she was fast enough to get there and back before he could really go anywhere. He looked pretty badly hurt, after all.

She swooped down with a speed of seventy, taking six segments to get there and wonder how she could stop a freaking ship that size from going anywhere.

It came to her fairly easily. *Take out the thing that makes it go.*

"*Combust!*" she cast, figuring that without putting any energy in, she could get 3 meters across on the sail per casting. With her bonus to STRength checks (which is what Mars is, after all) she cast it simultaneously twice each on the smaller sails, three times on the larger, for a total penalty of eight. She rolled maximum, working out to be a thirty seven, and the sails burst into flames in multiple places. A few sword slashes later, and the burning, tattered remains of the sails fluttered to the deck.

Now to get back and finish off my demon buddy.

Susan sped back, then hung in front of the creature, stunned. It was completely healed.

“Ready for the next go around?” it asked, bringing its sword up. “Nice work on the sails, by the way. Burning them like that? I approve.”

“Just- Just shut up! You think I wanted to do that?”

It looked Susan over. “Hard to say under all that armor, but you seemed to be having a good time doing it, yes.”

I agree, you were doing a lot of shouting and carrying on while you were slashing those ropes that held them up.

“Both of you shut up!” Susan yelled, lunging for the demon.

Their swords clashed together, both pushing against each other in the air. “Uh, there’s only us two here, are you feeling all right?”

I am rattled. Calm down, Susan, you can still take him.

“Dazzle!”

The demon flinched, but the spell bounced off his RESolve check.

How much energy does this demon have to spend? Wait, energy? She made an off hand attack, grabbing his arm.

“Energy Drain!”

Unfortunately, that didn’t work either, as the demon shrugged it off as well. Susan now had only fifteen energy left, and was getting somewhat desperate.

“Now you will see why we ifrit are so feared!” he cried, and was suddenly one size larger.

Susan held on, crying “*Mimic*,” the trigger word for her *Emulate Materia*. She also got one size bigger, keeping them even.

“And now I see why I feared you so much,” he remarked, throwing her off. “How in Hell did you do that? It felt exactly like what I just did, not magic.” In reality, Susan allowed herself to let go, not even making a check to hang on. She floated back, knowing that, as he had just done something actively it would be several segments before he would act again.

Have to end it quickly, before I’m out of energy and helpless!

She started casting, putting maximum energy into her spell, leaving her with five that she got back from *Energy Boost*.

“What are you up to?” asked the demon, as a magical circle appeared underneath them. “Whatever it is, I’ll stop you!” He swung, aiming to decapitate her, and she simply stood her ground, casting.

He did a raw thirty seven damage to her, divided by fourteen for her *Giant’s Soul*, then again by three for being a plus two size modifier at the moment. That left him doing one damage... to her armor.

Susan finished casting, getting a twenty nine against his REASON check of nineteen. He went slack, floating in mid air, with the sword held loosely by his side.

Should have just done that first. Can’t spend energy on REASON checks!

Yeah, why didn’t you just do that first?

Didn’t I tell you to be quiet?

High in the air, Susan breathed a sigh of relief as the demon was held fast by her spell of *Hypnotic Pattern*. She made a mental note to look into spells that were resisted by things that enemies couldn't put energy into, especially if this world was going to throw things like this at her. She could still feel heat and power coming from this thing, and it had no doubt been throwing energy around like crazy, just as she had, to avoid her attacks and spells. Plus there was that whole healing itself thing, *that must have taken some energy, right?*

She debated for a second if she should drain the demon dry of energy or just go after the talisman held by the pirate captain below. She had only five energy left, after all, and with the loss of the sails the ship wasn't exactly going anywhere. But there was the demon's feelings to consider, it might be more agreeable if it passed into her service without the memory of being destroyed in that manner. It seemed bound by the talisman to serve, but how hard it actually had to fight was probably not magically enforced, and she would rather have it somewhat willing than completely resentful of her.

And so she left the *Pattern* going and flew back to the pirate ship, where they were trying to put out the flames from where the burning sail had fallen. The captain wasn't immediately visible, but she did notice several people in the water trying to catch up to the ship and with a sigh went to go pick them up. With her increased STLength she was easily able to ferry them to the deck, where one by one she unceremoniously dumped them, then went back to fetch another. When she finally had them all out of the water she hovered above them, fiery blade in hand.

"Where's the captain?" she boomed, singling one man out with her sword. "I've just saved the lives of most of his crew. Bring me the talisman or I'll start putting you back out there. Well? Which is more important to you? That talisman or your worthless lives?"

Oddly, they seemed to be discussing it. There were many furtive glances over to the ball of flickering light that held the demon immobile, and finally they went off in search of their superior. He was hauled, protesting the entire way, up to the deck where he was shoved and fell over.

"The talisman," Susan demanded, holding out her left hand. "As you can see, I've bested your little pet, and by rights you did try plundering the vessel I was protecting." *I got to say the word 'plundering!' It's a good day after all.* "I think I can reasonably demand the talisman in recompense. It's a better deal than you would get in front of a..." *what would they use here? "Magistrate?"*

"Get her, get her!" screamed the captain, trying to back away on all fours.

"Are you nuts?" was the general sentiment shared by his crew, and they made a grab for him to try and get the talisman away from him.

I suppose I could use Retrieval and just grab it, but I would really like to hold onto that five energy I have left.

Susan watched in frustration as the men fell all over themselves to try and get the Talisman away from the captain, and finally decided she'd had enough. Hand still outstretched, she began to envision the mystical symbols that would make up the *Retrieval* spell. She had in mind the talisman, that she could see being tugged back and forth by the captain and two of his men. What she really wanted to do was go down there, start swinging, and if a couple died, who cared? Or something more dramatic and showy than it just vanishing. If only she could just make it leap out of their hands and fly towards her! Her ears were ringing, and that muttering voice in her head suddenly swelled as the amulet *really was* ripped out of their hands and flew towards her!

She made a *Catching* check untrained, getting a 7 (one from max) and the golden necklace almost seemed to magnetically guide itself into her waiting hand. She was so surprised at what had happened she nearly dropped it. She could *feel* it, somehow, not with *Spirit Sense* or *Dimension Sense* or anything like that, but through the muttering that had

offered her power. Ironically, she also was surprised to find she now had six energy, not five, and looked down at the astonished faces of those below her.

"I think that will be enough of that," she tried to say, but it came out rather more shaky and surprised than she had intended. She cleared her throat, putting her arm down at her side. "Do you have enough spare material to make new sails? I would not be calm even a vessel such as this one." *Becalm now, it's like a nautical paradise around here, verbally.*

Her brain started singing a messed up fusion of *Amish Paradise* and nautical terms, but she shushed it.*

The men below her now fell over themselves assuring her they would be fine, and to please leave them alone, and go far, far away. The captain was sobbing and demanding his talisman back, and Susan figured unless he got his act together, there might be the *Mutiny* card played on this boat before the night was through, and a new captain would rise.

This wasn't her concern, and she nodded a farewell to the men and went back to see about her new demonic 'ally.'

Hanging in midair, she looked the demon over, wondering what to do now. *I should now be the demon's master, right? I hold the talisman, though it might be a safety feature that once he's out, he regards the person that had it when he came out as his master even if the talisman changes hands. Of course, couldn't I order him back into the crystal? He wouldn't have to make a check for that, right? I'll try that, then if it doesn't work I'll drain some energy in case he gets uppity, then release him and see what he says.*

"Demon... no, Fearghus the Ifrit, by this talisman I command you! Return to the crystal at once! Pleasant dreams?"

The demon shimmered and seemed to break apart into energy sparkles that were sucked into the stone, which finally stopped glowing.

Ah, excellent. Susan stopped maintaining the *Pattern* and touched down on the deck of the Laughing Gull, putting her sword away and having all her spells vanish. What she saw concerned her- The crew was clustered around Illina, looking worried.

"She won't move!" insisted the captain when she got close. "We didn't dare touch her, for fear of becoming like her ourselves. But we tried to wake her up, honestly we did!"

"You did the right thing, captain," she soothed. "Let me take a look."

He seemed quite relieved and shouted for everyone to make way. Susan looked her over, then walked around her.

"Susan," said Illina, making her jump.

"Illina! You scared me. Are you okay? Why can't you move?"

"I don't know," she said pitifully, "is that demon gone?"

"Safely sealed," she said, holding the talisman up. "And it knows I can beat it, so it won't cause trouble. What happened to you?"

"He picked me up, then I was trying to get away and he said 'stop squirming' and touched me. I couldn't move after that. I was afraid to speak to the crew..." Tears were freely flowing down her face now.

"Oh, don't cry, we'll have you moving again in just a moment," she soothed, wiping Illina's face with a bit of cloth she found flapping in the breeze from the box attack earlier. "I'm just going to feel out a few things, see what I can tell about this. If needed, I'll try commanding the demon to tell me what he did. I would, of course, rather not have to resort to such things. Maybe our friend Sativola can help, too. Could someone go get her?" She looked behind her, but most seemed confused. "The witch, can someone bring the witch here?"

They all nodded, understanding, and someone rushed off to bring her.

Susan, meanwhile, tried sensing her out. *Magic Sense* at a ten gave her nothing, and *Spirit Sense* at a thirteen also just told her Illina's energy was far lower than hers, (higher at the moment of course) but that nothing was amiss. She scratched her head. *Some kind of paralyzation that will wear off? Some kind of technique to relax her muscles that doesn't leave a signature after it activates? I suppose I could use Liberty, but that's grade ten! Actually, I wonder...*

Susan got the knife out and held it up to Illina, but that didn't help either.

Magic, magic... what magic can I use to get this girl moving again?

It didn't help that Susan was somewhat distracted by the murmuring of the voice in her head, that seemed to have gotten stronger, and the odd sensations she was getting of "seeing the space between things" that she couldn't have explained to someone if she tried.

Is that you? she demanded of The Darkness. *Because it sounds like you, and if this is some new trick you're trying...*

Who, me? I don't need tricks, Susan, you know that. I only need you to be yourself. Proud. Angry. Vengeful, and powerful. Those are the moments I slip in and make you mine, just a little bit more. All this holding back you're doing, sticking to physical attacks of all things, do you really think they'll save you from me? We'll always be together, you and I, and I'll never get tired of corrupting you.

Better watch out though, maybe I'll be the one corrupting you someday.

The Darkness chuckled at that, but said no more.

By that time Sativola and Sparkle arrived, demanding to know what was happening. Susan filled them in, and both took a look over Illina.

"But I'm no Demonologist," cautioned Sativola. "I don't know what they can and can't do. Heck, you've proven to me in just the last two days I don't even know all that I can do!"

"Please try," asked Susan, putting a hand on her arm. "You know this world better than I do, and you have senses I don't."

Sativola nodded, then looked back at Illina. "You're terrified, aren't you? Don't worry, we're all doing the best we can to make you better, okay? Be brave for Susan and me, okay?"

"Okay," Illina said pitifully.

"Between you and me," Susan whispered to Sparkle as Sativola looked her over, "I'm pretty tapped out, energy wise. I might have one more strong spell in me, but without draining some energy from the crew, or resting, I'm out."

"That's not like you! That demon really pushed you, didn't it?" Susan nodded sadly. "Well, my ratings are nearly as good in *Theory* and *Scripture*, so with you assisting, I bet I could read over whatever and try it."

"And I do still have a *Lucky Break* card, I could use it and hope something happens to negate this."

"Sounds like a plan."

They looked through the book as Sativola sat cross legged in front of Illina, eyes closed. The two discussed various spells, and Susan got excited while reading over a Uranus spell referenced by the Mercury spell of *Paralysis*.

"Maybe we don't need the grade ten spell after all!" announced Susan. "The spell of *Mobility* will cancel out any and all forms of *Paralysis*, both physical and magical. And she seems paralyzed to you, right? Let's read it over!"

As they did, Sativola's eyes suddenly snapped open, and she reached for Illina, making a grabbing motion on her chest. "Ah ha!" she announced, pulling something invisible off, and Illina collapsed into a heap.

"You did it!" exclaimed Susan, getting up and going over to them both. "Illina, are you all right?"

"I'll be okay. What was it?" She was flexing her fingers experimentally.

"I'm not sure," admitted Sativola. "I felt something there, and I grabbed it off of you, but whatever it was it's gone now. I couldn't hold onto it."

"She'll be okay?" asked one of the sailors, who had been watching them intently.

Susan helped her up, and Illina did some stretches. "I'm okay!"

"Hey everyone, she's going to be okay!" he shouted, and the cry was taken up by everyone along the ship.

"Seems you've made some friends here," Susan said with a sly smile, bumping her with an elbow.

At this point, the passengers started making their way on deck, and asking what happened. The sailors told an only slightly exaggerated story of Susan's heroineism, and she

was thanked many times for driving the pirates off. The kids went back to playing, and the pirate ship slowly slipped out of sight as the Laughing Gull's sails were furled and once again caught the wind.

The captain was the last to approach Susan.

"I have to thank you for saving my vessel," he said. "I've never seen a wizard fight like that, I mean I've heard stories of what magic can do, but never- anyway. Here." He handed Susan a jingling pouch, and she hesitantly took it. "Please," he said, pushing it on her. "It's the least I can do, I would have lost far more if that gang had their way. Possibly even my life, trying to defend my ship. But you, dying never even crossed your mind, did it?"

"Not really," admitted Susan.

"Well, you do things strangely, I won't say you don't. But if those are the results, I say you keep on doing them." He looked embarrassed. "I don't suppose you'd consider sticking around, getting to know an old sea dog, would you? I've always wanted to sail other places than just the coast, and with you by my side, think of the places we could go! We could even become pirate hunters, make the sea safe for all honest tradesman! You and me, sailing together, the entire world our port of call." He lowered his voice, and shuffled closer. "I wouldn't begrudge you another kind of reward, in my bed tonight. Be better than sharing with that witch and the girl, am I right?" He didn't even have the decency to look even somewhat bashful when saying this last, but instead gave her a wide grin and a wink. Susan barely avoided rolling her eyes.

No, captain, I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong.

But instead she said, "A fine offer, but I'm not called Susan the Wanderer for nothing, captain. And my wandering isn't done on any one ship. Besides, she was taken by the demon, she may yet have nightmares. Best I stay with Illina, make sure she sleeps well."

"Oh, yes, that's most likely for the best. Well, if you change your mind... That is to say, the offer's open... I'll just be about my duties then." He turned and shouted something meaningless to the men, and Susan wondered if she had just gotten her first marriage proposal.

Should I be relieved to know that men, even those in other dimensions, are consistent in wanting only one thing?

Oh, like you wouldn't want that thing from Miss Sparkling Eyes over there, chided The Darkness. If there was even the slightest chance she would give it to you.

That's different.

Oh? How so?

It... it just is, that's all.

That night, Susan demonstrated floating things around for Sativola, who said she was definitely using Warlocky. She seemed very concerned about it, too. Sparkle did, as well.

"You get an energy every *turn* you use that power?" she asked. "I'm sure that doesn't have any sort of drawbacks."

"Can you use it?" Susan asked her. "Listen for some kind of voice, or mutter in the back of your head. That seems to be where this energy is coming from."

"You mentioned that before, when we first arrived. I still don't hear anything."

"So it's not the *Adaptive Skill*, letting us use that kind of magic that's here?"

"I don't know what *Adaptive Skill* gives us yet. Your father always had to sort of figure it out by trial and error, if it wasn't obvious because people were doing something he'd never seen done before."

"Super."

"I'd suggest not using that power at all, if you can help it," cautioned Sativola.

"Warlocks come to a bad end on this world, and even if you're here for only a short time, using it a lot could trigger the Calling."

"I can see why they call it that. If this voice in my head gets worse, I could see it driving me mad and making me do something I wouldn't normally. Are you sure warlocks are drawn to this place and not directly away from it? I mean if I was a warlock I would try to make the voice as quiet as possible. That would mean running away from it."

"I only know what any non-warlock knows. Using too much power leads to using the power unconsciously, which makes them want to use even more power. It isn't long after that they go flying off towards Aldagmor, and are never heard from again."

Susan grimaced. "Great, and that's the very place I need to go in order to investigate warlocks as you-know-who suggested. Does that mean as I get closer, this voice in my head is going to get worse?"

Sativola nodded gravely. "Anyone that goes too close becomes a warlock and is never heard from again. Whole towns disappeared on the night of madness, and that area became a wasteland, ruled by dragons and such."

"Wonderful. So why me? Why can I hear it and Sparkle can't? That doesn't make sense, unless he changed me without telling me before I came here, so I could hear it. That would make investigating it easier, but he's not Inari, to just smack someone with magic and not tell them about it, right?"

"I couldn't say," Sparkle replied. "I don't know enough about him or his motives. Remember what he is, even you're an ant from his perspective, as nice as he seems. It could be just an act, and he'll use you for his own ends- heck, he *is* using you for his own ends! Having you clean these worlds out, instead of doing it himself. He could have done anything to you, and you would never know it."

"I guess you're right. Still, I have a ten RESolve, so I should be able to resist using this new ability to any extent. I've only used it twice now, that shouldn't be enough to cause me problems, right?"

Sativola shook her head. "A warlock can expect twenty years of using that power, from the time they're an apprentice to the time they are as powerful as they can be. If they don't flaunt it too much, that is."

"And Susan isn't one for flaunting, let me tell you!" said Sparkle seriously.

"Not when it can kill me!" she protested. "To look cool, then naturally."

"Cool?" asked Sativola.

"Never mind."

Still, it deserves thinking about. What is offering this power, that I can hear it and Sparkle can't? Why do only some people on this world hear it? Why does getting to be a powerful warlock take negative effort, if using it gives the warlock energy rather than taking it? And why, after a certain amount of time using the power, do warlocks get drawn off and captured, or killed, by whatever is offering the power?

And why does this voice remind me so much of The Darkness?

**Been spending most our lives living in a Nautical Paradise.
Manned the oars once or twice, living in a Nautical Paradise.*

To Grandmother's House We Go

Time: Three Days Later

Place: Port

The next three days passed uneventfully, with Susan and the others going about their business. Susan's main task was to look through her book of magic and find spells that used a stat different than RESolve to resist. She found... fifteen. Of course, some couldn't be resisted because they were cast on oneself or weren't cast on humans, like the spell to allow stone to talk, but nine spells in her original book were resisted by STRength and only six by REAson.

False Image
False Sound
Hypnotic Field
Illusion
Nightmare Vision
False Invocation

And that's it. Come to think about it, the fact that people can just will my magic away seems odd. I mean, here I am, calling upon one of the very forces of nature, akin to calling lightning down out of the sky. If you get hit by lightning, you can't think really hard about how you would rather not be hit by lightning, and the lightning says 'okay, sorry about that' and gets sucked back up into the clouds. But I cast Shrink on someone, and if my 'result' is less than the 'result' they get by wishing really hard not to shrink, they don't. A person who doesn't even know what magic is would spontaneously get the ability to resist the second I cast the spell on them.

Am I, in essence, making them a Paragon for that split second they need to resist? And if so, what does that mean? Anything? I mean I carry my need for XP around with me, and the world provides me opportunity to increase my skills via that XP. Nita remarked on that as well, that I couldn't sit still and had to be doing something, like making spell papers or researching stuff. I thought that was just how I was, but could it be a function of my being a Paragon? I can't use Sparkle as another data point, she's a cat, despite what she says, and is usually napping. She's clearly a Paragon, I've seen her character sheet. But she admitted to being found by my father, and left as my Companion when he left this world. Did she become a Paragon by being put on my character sheet, or was she always one? Where did she really come from? If she was always one, are there other Paragons worlds? Would other Paragons be like me? Or would they lounge around like Nita did, despite the clear danger she was in?

And what about my own Character Sheet? Susan got it out and stared at it. My father could summon his, that much is clear. And Aerith and her friends seemed to know their stats without consulting anything. I mean they went on about "attack values" and "raising their level" and "I got five STRength from that last level," right? Is the world my father came from so very different, that we can use things like this? This separates me from others, rather than letting me get to understand them better. Is that worth how powerful I've become, and how much more powerful I'll get in the future? I couldn't have been born just for this, right?

Well, anyway. I was thinking about magic, and what I could do if someone gets grabbed like that again. Guess Hypnotic Pattern is about it, and throw lots of energy into it. Most things won't have a REAson above eight, right? Even demons from the lower plains can't be that smart, or they would figure out a way to escape Hell.

Susan got her book of magic out and stared at it. "I want a spell to look at someone else's character sheet, or equivalent!"

"OW!" Susan dropped the book in surprise, it had actually shocked her and fell open onto the deck. "What in the world?" She looked at the page that had been opened to, and her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

This spell cannot be researched because no planet you can cast from deals with the stated request. Sorry, my daughter.

“Dad... you really are inside my book, aren’t you?” She gently closed it and hugged it to her chest, thinking about her life and what her fate was going to be if she ever completed this journey she was on.

She didn’t even think to wonder what planet *would* deal with the stated request, and what that would mean.

“You’ll want to disembark here,” said the captain at the end of the third day after the attack. “Follow the road inland, the one going north-east, and you’ll reach the town you’re headed for in about five days. Maybe more, as you’re traveling with the ki- with Illina. There should be places to stop along the way, but you might have to spend a night or two out in the wilderness. Good luck.”

“Thank you captain, I’m sure it’ll work out just fine.”

He snorted. “With the magic at your command, somehow I believe you. I’ll be sorry to see you go, both you and your cat. Are you sure I couldn’t persuade you to stay?”

Not with a maxed out PERSONALITY and a ten in Persuasion. “Sorry captain, I don’t see myself becoming Susan the Captain’s Wife anytime soon.”

“Does have a nice ring to it, though right?”

Susan laughed and stuck out her hand. “Goodbye, Captain. It was nice sailing with you.”

“And you. Thanks again for driving off those pirates. Any time you want to sail, you do it for free aboard the Laughing Gull.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. You ready, Illina?”

“Yup!” She waved goodbye to all her new friends, made aboard ship, and the group went down the gangplank to the dock.

“Is this where we part?” asked Susan of Sativola.

“Are you nuts? I can bring back what you’re shown me so far, it’s true. But I have a feeling traveling with you is the opportunity of a lifetime. Until you have to leave this world, I’m with you.”

“Very well. Come on, we’ll head through town before we pick up speed, don’t want to upset the locals after all. Though if five days is right, maybe we should stay here the night.”

“What do you mean?”

“You heard him, it’s a five day journey right? Not looking forward to it, tell you the truth.” She glanced at Illina.

“Don’t worry so much. We’ll be there tomorrow night at the latest.”

“Huh?”

Susan giggled. “You’ll see.”

Susan asked around, but this town was too small to support a full time Sorcerer, so the group stopped into a local Inn, which didn’t gouge them too much, according to Sativola. Of course everyone in town stared at Susan’s strange clothes, and no one believed she was a wizard. Sativola, of course, looked the part of a witch and lent some air of authenticity to the claim.

“It’s just wizards and witches never travel around together,” she explained at dinner. “Wizards are... how to put this? They think they’re a bit above everybody else?”

“If you meet some you should get on famously,” remarked Sparkle.

“Or they’ll immediately try to kill each other,” giggled Illina.

“Why would we do that?” Susan asked. But she just shrugged.

Sativola went on. “And they don’t consider what we do to be real magic.”

“Of course it is. Anyone with eyes and a bit of *Magic Sense* can tell that.”

“Ah, but wizards don’t sense magic like that. Only we can do that.”

“Weird. But then, from what you said no wizard would stoop to asking a witch for

advice about magic.”

“There’s that, and the guild wouldn’t allow it. They consider that skill witchcraft.”

“And kill the wizard practicing two ‘types’ of magic, even though magic is magic.”

She nodded.

Maybe Illina is right, maybe we would immediately try killing each other.

The next morning the group awoke and had breakfast, then made ready to leave the town and make the journey. It wasn’t far outside the town’s borders that Illina was already complaining about having to walk.

“Good thing we’re not walking the whole way then,” Susan said to her with a grin.

“But you didn’t buy any horses...”

“Horses? No, no, they’re good for speed and short distances, but honestly they have to spend a lot of time eating, and they have to stand around to do it. You won’t get much further on a horse than your own two feet. Not if you want the horse to be alive at the end of it, anyway.”

“So will you do something with your magic?”

“Exactly,” she said, beeping her noise. “How would you like to fly?”

“Fly?”

“Yup. It won’t tire you out like walking, and it’s way faster. What do you say?”

“Okay!”

“You got it then. *Flight.*” Susan pushed as much energy into the spell as she could, as their speed depended on her REFlexes and the rating she had in the skill, and as the magical energy dispersed, she rose into the air. “Just think about it, and you’ll do it,” she explained.

Who needs pixie dust and a happy thought?

“OH!” Both her new friends tentatively rose into the air, then moved about. “It’s easy!” exclaimed Illina, doing a flip.

“It sure is. Now come on, I’d like to be there before dark, unless you want to sleep out under a bush.”

“No thank you!”

They flew.

With Susan’s magic, their speed was now a 160 vs the 7 it would have been, had she been walking. (Further slowed by Illina’s low stats and short legs, though Susan could have easily carried her. And Sativola, for that matter) The landscape flew by beneath them, though they stayed pretty low to the ground because the ‘road’ was more a worn path than anything constructed by people. Susan didn’t want to lose it, despite causing some concern to people already on the road when they flew by.

“Now I know how warlocks feel,” remarked Sativola. “Flying like this. I couldn’t do it on my own, that’s for sure.”

“I feel sorry for them,” said Illina.

“What, warlocks?” asked Susan.

“No, the people that have to walk.”

“Oh. It is odd, you think wizards could make a permanent teleport point between cities, and just charge per use. Even if the ingredients were hard to find or expensive, they would beat ships and have a constant income.”

Sativola shook her head. “But what if soldiers wanted to use them? That comes too close to using magic for political purposes. So even if they could, I bet they wouldn’t, just on the off chance that happens.”

“Man, so many rules, no wonder...” *these places look so run down, despite a general availability of magic.*

Not long later, the trio and one cat set down in the Village of Dawn. It, like the port town, featured neglected buildings, dirt roads, and lots of farmland at the outskirts.

“Now we just have to find your grandparents,” Susan remarked, looking around.

"Yeah," said Illina sadly.

"Guess we'll just ask around. Want to split up?"

"Probably best," answered Sativola. "Who should I ask for, anyway?"

"What?" Susan stared at her, but then realized she couldn't exactly ask for Illina the Quick's grandparents and be understood. "Oh, no, I get it. I never did ask you their names, did I?"

"No, you didn't," answered Illina, somewhat more sadly.

Susan waited.

"Oh dear," remarked Sativola, picking up on it more easily.

"What? Don't tell me..."

"I don't know their names!" wailed Illina, starting to cry. "Mom might have told me, but I don't remember. I thought I would remember before we got here but I didn't and now you'll all hate me and leave me here to be homeless and-"

"You told me," she sighed, taking Illina into a hug. "Come on now, don't cry. My magic has gotten us this far, right? I can just ask it what their name are, or who is best to ask. We know they're here, and the town isn't that big, right? It'll be fine."

"Okay," she sniffled.

One quick *Question* later and the group knew the person they were looking for was named Yseult the Closed Minded which Susan thought might be a bad omen. "Now we just have to find the right person to ask." *Though in a town this small, wouldn't everyone know everyone else?*

"Let's ask at the well, that's a common enough meeting point in a town like this."

Well?

But Susan followed Sativola to near the center of town, and sure enough there were a few ladies standing about talking, supposedly drawing water out of the well they were all leaning on. They looked shocked when Susan came up to them, and looked her up and down.

Ugh, keep forgetting about that. "Good morning!" she said cheerfully, resolved to ignore it. "I wonder if any of you can direct me to the house of Yseult the Closed Minded. This is her granddaughter, and I've just gotten into town, so we need to find her."

"Yseult? Wife of the carpenter? Sure, I can tell you where to go," said one of the women.

"You can? Thanks, that would be great."

So Susan got directions, which she hoped Sparkle was listening to, and went off in the direction the woman pointed to get started.

Sparkle took the lead again, and Susan followed.

"How did you do that?" asked Illina, "More magic?"

"Do what? I just asked where to find her."

"No, understand their funny language."

Susan stopped dead in her tracks. "Wait, they speak a different language here? We didn't travel that far!"

Sativola nodded. "People that travel need to know a bunch of different languages, at least the basics. They're all corruptions of some more common languages from way back when, so people can learn them pretty quickly. But yeah, even I was impressed with how you understood them."

Susan sighed. "Great. She's not even going to be able to talk to them until she learns the local language. It's never easy."

The houses didn't have something sane like numbers, but Susan was sure this was the place because of all the wooden things strewn about. Wood flower boxes, wood gutters going into a wooden rain barrel, that kind of thing.

"You ready for this?" asked Susan.

Illina nodded.

The group went up to the door and knocked.

They waited.

“Must be out,” remarked Sativola.

Susan made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting an eleven. That was enough to tell someone was in the house, or at least not far in that direction, anyway.

“Someone’s in there. Maybe they’re in the middle of something. We’ll wait a few minutes and knock again.”

So the group stood around, feeling a bit silly, and a neighbor came out and headed for them.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“We’re hoping to see Yseult,” Susan explained, pointing to the house with her thumb.

“This is her granddaughter, who we’re hoping she’ll take in.”

“Oh dear, that might be a problem. Anyway, she’s gone deaf so you’ll have to go round the back and hope she sees you.” The woman paused. “Uh, she never mentioned a granddaughter.”

“I see. I don’t know anything about that, but hopefully it’ll work out somehow. Thank you for letting us know.”

“Of course dear.” She went back, but glanced at them suspiciously.

So not only does she speak a different language, she was never told her daughter had a daughter, and she’s gone deaf? This should work out really, really, well.

“Can you do anything about deafness?” she asked Sativola.

“That depends on why she went deaf,” she explained. “Some forms I can cure, others I can’t. I can practice that way of *sending* my thoughts, but that might really freak her out.”

“I suppose. Guess we’ll see what happens...”

The three went around the back of the house and waved into the windows to get the woman’s attention. She opened the door, looking confused.

She looked worn, like most people, and Susan couldn’t help but think she looked older than her years. *Is she forty or sixty? People probably have kids early here, so two generations might not be as far apart as they would back on my world.* Her hair was gray, and her face lined, but she got up quickly enough from the sewing she was doing to answer the door.

“Can you hear me?” shouted Susan. The woman continued looking confused. “Of course not.”

The woman pointed, and Susan looked behind her to a large shed looking structure sitting in the back yard.

“I think she wants us to go back there,” ventured Sativola.

“Maybe her husband is back there?”

“Can’t hurt to check it out.”

Susan nodded, and the woman seemed satisfied, and closed the door again. The trio went over to the barn and looked inside. There was a man who, like the woman, was worn before his time. Beard, calloused hands, smelled of wood. He was holding a plane in his hand, and Susan realized she had never actually seen such a thing in person before.

Illina was hiding behind her again.

“Yes?” said the man.

“Sorry to disturb your work, but I believe you had a daughter that moved to Ethshar of the Rocks some time ago?”

“My daughter lives there, yes. What’s this about?”

“Just to be clear, that’s Rhiannon of Ethshar?”

“Her name is Rhiannon, yes. Really, what is this... no, it can’t be.” The man dropped his plane, looking at Illina for the first time. “You... are you... you look so like her when she was small!”

“This is your granddaughter,” Susan said sadly, knowing Illina wouldn’t understand his question. “I have some sad news regarding your daughter.”

“She had a child? You’re really my daughter’s daughter? She never said, never wrote

to us even once. Wait, if you're here that can only mean..."

Susan nodded. "I'm afraid she died several days ago. Disease, she died in her sleep. I'm sorry."

"My daughter, is dead? How do you, no, she couldn't be dead. Who are you? Can't be dead." The man seemed a bit dazed, and sat down heavily in a nearby chair.

"My name is Susan. Susan the Wanderer. I found Illina here outside her house crying, and had the body buried. It turned out you were her closest relatives, so we came to see if you would take your granddaughter in. I know this is going to be hard, but we'll need to speak to your wife and decide what we're going to do with Illina."

"Making her understand her daughter is dead... I can't believe it myself. How did you even find us? She was so adamant about never coming back here again, or wanting to see us again. I didn't think she kept any record of where we were, and we came to this village some time ago, after she left home!"

"I found out with magic," she answered simply.

"You hired a wizard, or a Theurgist? I suppose you would have-"

"No. I'm a wizard."

"You?" He looked doubtfully at Susan.

"How about I prove it by curing your wife's deafness, and we can discuss things with her?"

"You can do that?" He seemed impressed, but sobered again "This is all so sudden. Can you even prove anything that you're saying? How do I know this isn't your daughter, and you're trying to get rid of her?"

"I could take you back to Ethshar, you could talk to the Theurgist that prayed for her soul to find the afterlife. Or the city guard, have them show you her now empty house."

"That would take weeks?"

Susan shook her head. "I could have you there in less than a minute."

"What's a 'minute?'"

Do You Believe In Magic?

Place: Inside Illina's Grandparent's house

Time: Moments later

Susan wasn't sure if *Alleviation* would work in this case, because if Yseult's deafness was age related, that spell wouldn't work on it. The much easier to cast and far lower level *Cure Deafness* would though, so Susan quickly read it over (with eighteen and fifteen checks) and cast it.

"Can you hear me now?" she asked, aware that the phrase most often said over cell phones (in desperation because we can communicate with rovers on Mars but can't get a signal across a neighborhood with any kind of real reliability) had a totally different meaning here.

"I can hear you perfectly fine," replied Yseult. "I don't believe it."

"What, that magic could cure deafness?"

"No, that any wizard would work for free. What do you want?"

"As I explained to your husband, I want nothing. Your granddaughter, on the other hand, needs a place to live until she's old enough to be apprenticed to someone, as I understand it."

"Who? Start at the beginning, won't you?"

So Susan and Glifieu (The Handy) explained to the woman that her daughter was dead, and she reacted a bit differently than her husband.

"I don't believe it."

Wow, if there was a person that took Skeptic to an extreme, it would be her.

"As I said to your husband, I can take you back to the very room your daughter died in, and show you my arrival and the removal of her body. We can also talk to the priest- sorry the Theurgist who performed the burial."

"Go on then, let's see this wonder!"

"Very well. *Teleportal.*"

Susan had no trouble opening the hole back to Ethshar of the Rocks, and Yseult grunted and stepped through.

"This could be anywhere!"

Susan sighed. "And I suppose if you stopped any random person on the street and asked where you were, they would probably lie to you."

"They probably would."

"I'm sorry about her," apologized Glifieu. "I believe you. That was magic if I ever saw it."

"Not like I ever saw," muttered Sativola, poking her head out the door. "We're really here, just like that."

"Now for the second part," said Susan, readying *Time Area*. She specified the time just before she and Illina could be seen collecting the body, and the ghostly image of the dead woman appeared in the bed.

"That is our daughter," remarked Glifieu sadly. "Even you can't deny that, Yseult."

"I... well..."

They all watched as a ghostly vision of Susan was seen through the older *Teleportal*, walking back into the room and easily picking the body up. She then walked back and the *Teleportal* winked out, so Susan dropped *Time Area* as well. "Satisfied?"

"I am."

"I suppose."

"Shall we go back, or would you like to speak to the Theurgist?" Susan indicated the floating hole in space.

"She really is gone?" asked Yseult.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, she didn't want anything to do with us, I don't see why we should have anything to do with her brat." She turned and walked back through.

Hey, think there was a reason for that? asked the Darkness. *Like maybe these weren't the best parents, and maybe leaving Illina with them will only lead her to turning bitter and hating them too?*

You know, you're probably trying to stir up trouble, but that's actually a good point.

"Why did your daughter leave, if I may ask?" she asked Glifieu, who was still looking around.

"What? Oh, can't you guess?" He nodded in the direction of Yseult, who was back sewing like there wasn't the most powerful magic user two meters from her.

"No, I can. That's why I'm asking. I have to do what's best for Illina, and I'm beginning to question if leaving her with you two, no offense, is the best I can do."

He sighed. "I can see your point. Come on, let's talk to her, I'm sure we can work something out."

"They don't want me?" pipped up Illina. "Is that what they're saying?"

"Your grandmother is being a bit difficult," explained Susan. "We're going to see what arrangement can be made."

"I'm sorry!"

"It's not your fault. Come on, let's head back."

"A week's journey, back and forth, in just a step," remarked Sativola as she stepped through again. "I can't get over it."

"I thought I made my position clear," grumped Yseult, once all were back through and the *Teleportal* was shut down again.

"Sadly," Susan said sarcastically, "you only get one half the vote. Your husband seems more inclined than you to take in *his own relative* so you either have to convince him otherwise or allow her to stay. Simple as that."

"I don't change my mind easily, girl."

"Neither do I," Susan said angrily, leaning closer. "And I can just as easily put your deafness back if you turn her away. The cure is part of the deal."

"You wouldn't!" gasped Sativola.

Sparkle nodded, but only the party saw it, the other two weren't paying attention to 'the cat.'

"Now, now," calmed Glifieu, "let's not let our emotions get the better of us. This has all been a bit of a shock, and I know you're grieving for your daughter in your own way. Perhaps we should all just take the day and think about things?"

Hey, what do you think this guy's rating in Persuasion is, living with a woman like that?

Susan snorted. *Good question.*

Hey, think you'll end up like her when you're ancient? You're both unreasonable women, right?

That brought her up short.

He was staring at the group as if expecting an answer.

"Oh, he wants to maybe revisit the topic tomorrow, when the shock has worn off a bit," Susan translated for the others. Sativola now seemed to understand, and Illina just looked more pitiful.

"That sounds like a good idea," said Sativola. "There's an inn here, right?"

"Yeah, you must have passed it on the way in."

"Why doesn't Illina at least spend the night here, get to know her grandparents? Perhaps when Yseult sees what a nice, polite girl you are, Illina, she'll be more inclined to allow you stay?" Yseult snorted. "We'll stay at the inn, and come this time tomorrow to finalize everything. What do you say?"

"Okay," Illina said pitifully. "But I can't talk to them!"

"So listen. If you really want to be a witch, listening is one of the best skills you can learn. Maybe you can watch your grandfather working, and he can tell you what he's doing. Languages aren't that different, once you get used to them."

"Okay."

Susan turned to the man. "Is it all right if she stays here the night? You should get to know her before you make any final decisions, right?"

"Just keep her out of my way," injected Yseult, to no one's surprise.

"It sounds fine to me. She can have the spare room, we'll get it ready together, how does that sound?" He knelt down and put a hand on her shoulder.

She looked up at Susan. "He's asking if you'd like to help him get your room ready?"

"Okay!"

Susan considered a moment, then pulled off the talisman and slipped it over Illina's head. "You protect her for the moment, understand?" It glowed slightly.

"Is that necessary?" asked Sativola.

"Probably not," Susan admitted. "But she's the only one of us without magic of her own yet, so it makes me feel better knowing she has it. Just in case." Her eyes darted to Yseult, who was trying to look past her to see what Illina had been given.

The two went off, and Susan turned back to Yseult. "Do you want your daughter's things?"

"Things? What things? Her house was empty! Probably whoring in the streets, that's where her brat came from."

"It was empty," Susan continued somewhat angrily, "because I already collected everything in it, with magic. If you want her stuff I'll dump it someplace and you can go through it."

"Probably just junk anyway. Sure, go put it somewhere, I don't care."

"Wonderful person," remarked Susan as Sparkle and Sativola left the house.

"We don't know her situation though," cautioned Sativola. "Everyone has a reason for why they are the way they are."

"I suppose."

"Would you really have made her deaf again?"

"I'd like to say no, but knowing me, yes, probably. Her not taking in Illina would have infuriated me, and burning their house down wouldn't be fair to her grandfather."

"I... I see."

"She wouldn't burn the house down," chided Sparkle. "Not even you're that far gone, Susan."

Yet, put in The Darkness. Pity, really. I always did love that traditional outdoor meat roasting ceremony you people are so fond of. What do you call it? Barbecue?

"So what do two young girls looking for a good time do in a town like this?" asked Susan, walking back towards the inn.

"Try and keep as low a profile as possible?" replied Sativola, holding a palm up.

"What?"

"Not a lot of law enforcement around here, and travelers are easy marks," she explained.

"Not these three travelers," scoffed Susan.

"Ah, but they don't know that. Did you have something in mind?"

"Hard to say, I guess I want to learn more about the place we're leaving Illina. What kind of people live here? Will she be accepted into the community? Are all these people werewolves or ghouls in disguise? These are all important questions, you know."

"What are either of those things?"

"Guess not. Hey, what's this all about?" In front of the inn there was a large board with papers tacked up on it.

"Seems to be some kind of announcement board. News, requests for help, that sort of thing."

Ah, no newspapers in this time. Wonder if I should help someone invent the printing press? "Wait, requests for help!? Now that's right up my alley! What have we got, I'll have this board cleared by dinner time!"

"Is she serious?" she asked Sparkle.

"Usually. She gets a kick out of showing off her magic, so why should being here be any different? I'm going to find a place to nap, you girls have fun."

The first notice was from a farmer on the outskirts of town that wanted several men to help him dig a new well. After he figured out where to put the new well, that is. Susan figured she could do both, and with Sativola's help found the right place and wandered around until she found the owner.

"Still looking to have that well dug?" she called over to him.

"Your brothers looking to do some work?" he called back.

"I tell ya," she remarked to Sativola, "sexism in the workplace. It never ends. Actually I'm a wizard!" she called. "I'll have you a new well dug before you know it."

"Wizard?" The man looked her up and down. "I can't pay a wizard's prices."

"I'm only asking what you would pay the men who came to dig. I'll find the spot for free."

"You serious?"

"I sure am."

"Go to it then. Old well is out that way." He vaguely pointed, and Susan ducked her head in thanks and headed in the direction he pointed.

"What's the plan?" asked Sativola.

"Don't suppose you can find water?"

"Water doesn't have thoughts. But with what you've been showing me, who can say? Let's put it this way, I've never tried to before so I have no idea."

Hey, she's learning to at least question if something is possible instead of just dismissing that it is. That's a big step. "Ah well. There's a spell called *Elemental Discovery*, perfect for finding the largest nearby source of an element. In this case, I'll cast it for water, and see what I get. In all likelihood the water is just shifted over underground, so we'll find it and I use my digging spell to get down to it."

"Oh."

So she did.

There was another source of water not far from the old well, so Susan cast *Excavate* a few times, not going for width but rather depth. The spell didn't care what direction the '1-cubic meter per Uranus rating' was, so straight down she went. She cast it twice and went to get the bucket and rope from the old well. The farmer saw her and came over, curious.

"You really did this?" he asked, looking at the neatly placed stack of dirt beside the new hole on his property.

"I really did," she said, lowering the bucket.

"You going to be okay? That bucket's pretty large, and it's heavy when it's full."

"Not to worry."

She brought up a bucket full of water.

"Well I'll be! And you really don't want any more than I would have paid a couple of men to do that?"

"That's right."

"Okay. Last wizard who passed through here wanted way more than I could afford, but as long as you're happy..." He handed her some coins.

"I'm not done yet," she protested.

"What, it's water, isn't it?"

"What about the wall?"

"What *about* the wall? You aren't going to move that too, are you?"

"I can't just leave it a hole in the ground. That's not a well, that's an accident waiting to happen. There are kids running all over town, what if some of them came back here?"

She walked back over to the old well. "It's just bricks stacked up around the hole, right?"

"That's right."

"Super." One casting of *Telekenisis* later, and the whole thing floated over to its new home. *Luckily, this counts as one object as it's been all fused together. I don't have to target each individual brick.* Then she targeted the pile of dirt with *Elemental Sculpting* (a grade two

spell to control an element) and made it slither itself into the old hole, closing it up at least part way.

“You’re a warlock!”

“Who says I am? And would it be a problem if I was?”

“But... No, I mean... Ah, who cares? Long as the job’s done, I don’t care what kind of magic you’re using. You’ve saved me a lot of work, I’ll add a bit more copper. Here you go.”

“Thank you kindly.”

The next job found Susan, as she heard a crash on the way back to the job board, followed by some choice swear words. She jogged over to find a cart laden with flat stones that had a rather obviously broken rear wheel. A man with a younger boy were standing there, and the man was obviously in some distress. The younger man looked resigned, probably thinking how they were going to have to unload all the stones, prop up the wagon, repair the wheel, and then put all the stone back. Others in the town were gathering to see what the commotion was.

“Seems you have a busted wheel,” remarked Susan.

“No, you think so?” groused the man, throwing his hat down. “And I have to get this stone in by tonight, too!”

Susan looked the cart over, the stone was pretty well packed so it didn’t seem any had broken. At least, not on the top.

“What say I fix it for you?”

“You the town fool, in those clothes? Get away from here!”

“You don’t seem all that polite,” she remarked, easily hefting the corner of the wagon into the right position. “Especially to a person offering to help you out. Why is that?”

“By the gods!” shouted the man, taking a step back.

“Yes, yes. Bow down and all that. *Repair!*” The wheel was fine again, and Susan gently set it down, making sure it would hold. “There, see? Not worth carrying on about, now was it?”

“A warlock! Well, I’m not paying you for it. For all I know you caused the wheel to break in the first place! You’re looking to scam me out of the job fixing the wheel, yeah, that’s it!”

“That’s fine, I wasn’t going to charge you in the first place! I just thought doing a good deed would be appreciated. Guess I was wrong.”

“Master, you said yourself if that wheel made it all the way, it would be a miracle.”

“You shut your mouth boy!”

“I just don’t think it’s wise to upset a warlock. Especially not one that can lift that much weight, she could explode your head from there.”

The man stiffened, looking over at Susan who was lifting four or five of the stones at once, checking to see if any lower down were cracked. She smiled at him, looking out the corner of his eyes. The man reached for his pouch. “How much?”

“Let’s get this delivered first,” she said, waving him off. “I think some of the lower ones *are* cracked, or at least chipped. If you want them repaired too I’ll come along. And don’t worry, my rates are fair, especially when you consider the cost of hauling new stones around to replace the busted ones if I don’t come with. Figure in the replacement cost, unsatisfied client, another day of work... Need I go on?”

The man’s eye twitched, but he said that was fine, and climbed up into the seat again.

In the end, Susan had to cast *Repair* a couple of times, and in addition to a silver coin, paid by the wealthy man having the stones set into his back yard as a kind of patio, she took some energy from everyone there to replenish her supply. They were quite hesitant to have it done, but after Sativola offered while they watched, they agreed.

In the end Susan spent the day going about town and cleaning off the job board. It seemed there was no shortage of work to do, at least dirty jobs that no one in their right mind would actually want to do for the amount of coin the people with the jobs were offering to pay. But Susan didn’t care, she used her magic to do most of the work, and her STRength took care of the rest. From each person she took some coin and some energy, so even after hours of work she still had a reasonable amount. And a bulging pouch of copper and silver, even a

few gold pieces too.

"You really do like showing off," Sativola said as they came back to the inn after the last job.

"I like helping people," Susan corrected. "If that means I get to show off a little, so be it. I have an amazing amount of magic at my command, and I'm good at it. Well, slightly above average anyway. And these people look like they need all the help they can get. Plus I have the coin of the realm now, which can't be a bad thing. Would you have preferred to just sit around, bored all day? This way I got to meet the townsfolk, did some good, made some money, and used my magic to help people. It's win-win-win-win."

"I guess you're right about that. Hey, do you feel that?"

"Feel what- Earthquake!"

In fact the ground was shaking, and nearby kids were scrambling back to their houses in terror.

"What's an earthquake?"

"What's an- this! Don't you have earthquakes, either? You know, tectonic plate movements?"

"The what? This is magic, the earth never shakes like this!"

"Magic? That's crazy, why would someone-" Susan did a *Magic Sense* as she said this, getting an eleven, and both girls looked in the same direction. "You're right. We better get over there!"

Susan and Sativola skidded to a halt in front of a growing hill, and Sparkle ran up behind them.

"You're not doing this for some bizarre reason, are you?" she queried.

"No!"

"Oh. Then you better be ready for trouble!"

"I'll make it double!"

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Quiet!" She laughed as she said it though.

"Do you hear music? Like a flute playing or something?"

"No, just rumbling."

"Wait, it's opening!" yelled Sativola, and she was right. From the mound an opening started to form, and several figures stepped from the very earth. Each wore a fine robe and carried a staff. One carried two, probably for the one currently playing the flute. Another carried no staff, but instead a fine golden goblet, and she had a knife poised ready to dip into it. In fact all had knives out, and Susan immediately knew that these eight people were wizards.

The woman in front stopped playing and the ground stopped shaking, the small hill also melting back into the ground without a trace. She shoved the flute into her sleeve, grabbed her knife and staff from the man next to her and shouted to the assembled crowd now gaping at the assemblage of wizards.

"What's going on around here!?"

Wizard Battle- Not so Much

Place: About the center of town

Time: Just then

I'll tell you what's going on, said The Darkness. A bunch of wizards just popped out the earth and started demanding to know what was going on!

Susan giggled, but didn't shout this out despite her desire to.

Too bad, it would have been hilarious. Anyway, these people seem a bit perturbed for some reason. You don't think it has anything to do with you, do you?

I don't see why it would...

No? You think the wizard's guild, most powerful group of magic users in the entire world, wouldn't take issue to some young thing like yourself flinging the gods only know what sort of magic about all over the place?

They aren't witches, how would they know?

You think they can't employ witches? Or that they don't have scrying spells going to make sure another Night of Madness isn't happening under their noses?

Night of- oh, you mean when warlocks came into the world and everybody went nuts overnight.

Yeah, that one. They take a dim view of competing magic here, Sativola told you as much. Wonder if you'll have to fight them! That would be a nice change of pace from all this goody-goody stuff you've been doing all day.

Good point. Not that any magical battle wouldn't be rather one sided, even with that many 'wizards' on their side. But I've not gotten to use this yet, and I paid enough for it, so why not? "Negation," Susan said, touching her *Wizard Bracelet*. The spell of *Magic Domination* took hold, and now Susan's magic was the only magic that could work anywhere around her.

An elderly man hobbled up to the assembled group and started bowing and scraping before the assembled wizards.

"Mighty wizards!" he began. "So honored to have you in our humble village. I'm the mayor, we certainly don't want any trouble here. You asked what was going on? I'm afraid I'm not sure what you mean. Please, come to my house and we can discuss things as you desire."

Wow, he's really afraid of them. The wizard's guild really does throw its weight around, doesn't it? Even in a podunk down like this, the mayer is falling all over himself to try and placate them.

"No, we must discover the source of what we have come to find before it gets away. All of you, stay where you are!" shouted the woman in front. "Line up. We're looking for someone in foreign clothes..." She trailed away as her eyes met Susan's. "You!" she shouted, pointing with her dagger. "Come forward!" The crowd parted.

Odd thing to wave about, a tiny dagger like that. Wonder if it's the local equivalent to a wand?

"Me?" Susan said, trying to act innocent. "What would the great and powerful Trixie, I mean, wizard's guild, want with little old me?"

"Don't play stupid!" snapped the woman. "Our magics told us about the incredibly powerful source of magic that appeared in Ethshar of the Rocks several days ago. It then moved about the city, sailed up the coast, then made it here in an hour. We traced it to a young girl in strange clothes, and you fit the bill. Who are you?"

"Susan The Wanderer, at your service, of course, mighty wizard." She made a mocking bow.

"I know of no Susan the Wanderer. Your magic is not wizardry, or warlocky, or witchcraft. There was some sorcery near you, but that seems to have vanished. Yet your magic resembles all three of these, something expressly forbidden by the guild! Explain yourself!"

"I don't see why I should," countered Susan. "Who are you, to demand explanations

from me? You want to know me? Fine, speak to the people my magic has helped in this town. They'll tell you I used my magic responsibly, and charged a fair price for it. You have no claim to demand any more about me than that."

"The wizard's guild holds dominion over all magic, that gives me the right to demand your answer!"

"It's true," someone from the back shouted.

"Thank you, but I don't need your help."

"No," said a man coming from the back. "I mean it's true what she said. She came to me about a job I posted a week back, and she worked quickly and well. Never saw anything like it, to be honest, but what do I know of magic?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, Susan had met a lot of the townspeople on her 'do good' binge that day.

"That's not the point!" insisted the wizard. "Her magic is too strong, and too dangerous. If she will not cooperate with us, then the law is clear. She must be put to death for practicing more than one kind of magic."

There was a cry of protest from the crowd, but the wizard remained unmoved. Susan stood there, arms folded. "You can prove that, can you?" she challenged.

"What?"

"Prove it. Prove I'm using 'more than' one kind of magic, instead of just my own personal magic, which happens to be a bit better than yours. You say my magic isn't wizardry, or warlocky, or the rest. And you're right, it's my magic, one type of magic, which you would have learned if you had come here and asked me, rather than make demands of me."

"The law is clear, and your magic, as unknown as it is, must be stopped before great tragedy befalls the world. All our divinations have pointed to this one undeniable fact, that you are at the center of a great upheaval in our world. To avoid this fate you will be painlessly put to death unless you submit to our demands immediately!"

"I'm here to *save you* from this great upheaval you speak of! So of course I'm in the center of it. But if you think you can take me, then go ahead, try it," she growled. "See how far it gets you."

"Very well, you leave us little choice. By the power vested in me by the wizard's guild-"
I pronounce you all jerks together, The Darkness snuck in there. Susan struggled not to giggle.

"-I sentence you to death!" She nodded to the wizard holding the cup, and that wizard plunged the knife she was holding into the liquid in the cup.

The crowd waited.

Susan stared at them.

"Well?" she said at last. "That doesn't seem to have done much. What else have you got?"

The wizard's eyes were wide now, apparently they hadn't considered whatever they were doing to be fallible, but before anything else could happen, a small figure shot forward and stood in front of Susan, arms spread.

"Don't you dare hurt her!" cried Illina, "Stupid wizards, with your rules, and your greed. Where you were when my mother lay dying? Where were you afterwards, when I was crying and alone and scared? You didn't do anything! Susan did! She took me in, and fed me, and made me clothes, and paid for my mother's funeral, and for passage here, and fought off pirates, and introduced me to my grandparents. She's my friend and if... if... you hurt... you'll have to go through me first!"

By this time, everyone was gaping at her, unsure where this little fireball of a girl had come from. Susan, on the other hand, was moved. She crouched down and hugged Illina from behind.

"Thank you," she said softly. "That was probably the bravest thing I've ever seen anybody do. Yelling at wizards, who taught you that? When I have a daughter, I hope she's

just exactly like you.”

“You mean it?”

Susan couldn't even answer, she just nodded her head and wondered if she could make a RESolve check not to tear up or burst with pride at the girl she had only known a few days.

There are some extraordinary people here, she figured. If only they could really be given the chance I was. What happened to this world, anyway? How did the people here get so beaten down?

Magical wars, answered The Darkness. Terrible, joyous, magical wars.

Meanwhile, the lady with the knife was plunging it into the liquid over and over, as if trying to start a car with a dead battery.

“Oh, knock it off,” Susan shouted to her, making a twenty three RESolve check to not use warlocky. Instead she did a quick *Retrieval*, and the knife was in her hand instead. She stood up, Illina by her side and one hand protectively around her shoulder. The wizards gasped. “That's right, I've locked down magic in this area. Mine, and mine alone, will function.”

“Give that back!” demanded the woman, struggling against the man now holding her back from charging at Susan.

“Is it really that-” Susan held it up to look at it, and caught something odd with *Spirit Sense* now that she was touching the thing. She made a check, getting a seven, but even that was enough to tell the thing had *spirit energy* inside it. And the only way that was possible was... “Oh, tell me you didn't. Seriously?” She also did a *Magic Sense*, getting a nine, but again the knife was very charged magically (taking 24 hours to create, not that she knew that) so she could feel both kinds of power in it. The only things that had *spirit energy* were alive things like animals, or planets in the form of *ley lines*. That left only one conclusion for this item. “You put a piece of your soul in here, didn't you?”

There was a collective gasp as the wizards recoiled, fury bubbling to the surface.

“Kill her! Any way you can!” shouted the lead wizard, and the staves were thrown down. Powders and other weird things were produced from pockets and pouches as the wizards as a group shouted, gestured, and waved their little knives about while Susan watched.

“Are we going to die?” asked Illina.

Susan scoffed. “No, we're perfectly safe, my magic is protecting us.”

“Oh, okay.” She smiled.

After a moment the wizards figured out they couldn't work any magic at the moment, and the one with the flute brought out another and tried playing it. Sound came out, but nothing else happened.

She lowered it, looking over at Susan as the blood drained from her face.

“What... what are you going to do to us?” she asked, plainly fearful. “If you kill us, other wizards will know-”

“Do? What do you mean? Oh, right, you attacked me. How about I just break this?”

She held up the knife, and the wizard finally tore out of the man's grasp and lunged for Susan with a yell.

“Enough!” shouted Sparkle, putting herself in between the two. “She won't do that, trust me. Susan, give her the knife back, it obviously holds her soul so stop teasing her. She's obviously terrified, just look at her.”

“Fine.” Susan rolled her eyes but flipped the knife in her hand, holding it out to the woman who gratefully snatched it back.

“Now look,” Sparkle continued. “If you all would stop posturing and threatening each other, maybe you would find out you were all on the same side and could work together. Remember that, Susan? Working together with the local people to drive back The Darkness? You're going to need their help, and you know it. As far as you all, I am very disappointed that the very first thing you did was try and kill her. You could have sent someone to check the situation out. You could have extended a hand of friendship. But no, you threatened her, and that won't work with Susan, believe me. She won't kill you, but maybe you'll wish she had in

the end. She could easily take your magic away and there wouldn't be a thing you could do about it. Now start getting along, already!"

The wizards stared at the cat.

"Did... that cat just talk?" asked one of them.

Susan sighed. "Yes, she did. And as usual, she's talking sense, if a little late. Look, I'm sorry about the whole knife thing, I don't really know what it means that you did what you did with it. But the fact remains you did try to kill me just then, so at least part of the blame is yours."

"Maybe I could mediate or something," spoke up Sativola. "I'm not in the guild, but Susan trusts me, I think, and the guild could check up on me. I wouldn't mind that."

"Who are you?" asked the woman with a sigh of resignation.

"Sativola of the Sparkling Eyes, guildmaster," she replied. "And once I speak to my master again and tell her the amazing story of my adventures with Susan, and what she's taught me about magic, it'll be Sativola The Witch."

"A witch. I see. I suppose she could be counted on to tell us if the girl was lying."

"My name is Susan."

"That has yet to be determined."

"It is!" agreed Illina, who was ignored.

"If you will lift this 'restriction' of yours, we can be on our way." She lifted the flute again.

"Very well, once I do a few things here. First..." She stalked over to the man now holding the cup, and roughly grabbed it away from him. Dumping the liquid out and crushing the cup in her hand with a thirty two STStrength check, her eyes never left the man's. She let it fall, then walked back to Illina. He stared down at the crushed lump of a cup and gave it a quick tap with his toe to make sure it was real. "I'll be back tomorrow, I promise," she said to her. "You be good for your grandparents, and here..." She handed her the pouch of coins she had made that day. "You'll need money to be apprenticed, right?" Illina nodded. "This money is yours now. I don't know if it'll be enough, but it should be a start."

"It will be for me," said Sativola. "I'll be a real witch soon, you can apprentice to me when you're old enough. I'll come back when you are, that's my promise to you. But I'll still see you again tomorrow, in any case."

"Yay! Thank you!" She ran over to hug Sativola.

Perhaps someone else has noticed her potential as well?

"And I guess you could come live with me, if your grandparents refuse you. But I think your grandfather will talk your grandmother around, so give them a chance, okay?"

"Okay!"

"Now can we go?" asked the wizard.

"Awfully impatient," remarked Susan. "For a bunch of people that just showed up out of nowhere and started demanding things. In any case, I'm not going anywhere with you. You're going somewhere with me."

"Outrageous!" said one of the male wizards.

"Hey, I have business in this town still, and while it would be easy enough for me to get back here, I want you someplace I can keep an eye on you all. I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, and that's pretty far, come to think of it. You want to know who I am? What I'm doing here? Why I have the power I do? I'll be happy to tell you- on my terms. I'm not crazy about people trying to kill me, but Sparkle is right. I may need you before this is over, so I'll put your reaction down to fear and hope you're wise enough to see I can be of great help to you. If you'll let me."

"It's a question of security," said the head wizard. "We aren't going to your room at the inn or whatever."

"I haven't even been there," replied Susan, brushing that off. "No, you're going to my world."

The wizards looked a bit uncomfortable, but Susan didn't care.

"Clear a space here, move along! Show's over!" she shouted, getting out a *Spell Paper of Personal Dimension*.

Good thing I made some of these, standing around for twenty minutes with a bunch of

trigger happy wizards, even ones that are declawed at the moment, isn't on my to do list. What kind of mixed metaphor was that? asked The Darkness. I don't think I need to explain myself... to myself. Whatever.

Susan activated the paper, and a dimensional tear appeared before her. "All wizards who want to talk, come with me. Once I'm inside wizardry will start working here again, and anyone not coming can go back."

There was a quick council as the wizards decided who was going, and in the end, six of the eight decided to go while the wizard in charge handed over the flute to those going back. She stepped through, followed by the others.

Sparkle and Sativola followed, and Illina peaked in, then waved and ran off again. The portal closed, and the wizards looked around.

"You didn't even use a tapestry, you just tore open a hole to this place!" remarked one.

"Indeed. Come on, it's not a long walk to the cabin, I can offer you some refreshments and we can talk. I'll be happy to answer all of your questions about me, this place, my magic, the whole bit. Oh, and don't bother trying to kill me here. I'm sure you can work out for yourselves... if you do, you'll never leave."

At least, in theory. If I die outside my dimension, everything in it comes tumbling out. But what happens if I die inside it? My father's notes don't say, probably because no one was foolish enough to ever try it.

Or else if they did, their bodies were lost to the space between dimensions, put in The Darkness, sounding pleased with the notion.

So Susan played the hostess, and offered her "guests" some food and drink from other worlds. (Basically prepackaged food and soda, which they all exclaimed over) Two even started a discussion about what kind of spell could duplicate the effect of carbonation, as well as the refrigerator that was keeping them cold.

Finally they got down to business. Susan explained she was a dimensional traveler, which they actually took in stride pretty well.

"Have you met a spriggen yet?" one asked. "They came to this world from a magic mirror, so there's precedent. Wizards have long known other worlds existed, we can reach them with tapestry magic. It stands to reason someone from one of those other worlds might come here one day."

She also told them about her magic, and how it was applied, and what the limitations were. They were very curious about her limits, and just how much magic she could do at any one time. It seemed wizardry was very time consuming here, on the order of hours for many spells, which limited what one person could do in a day. Basically for them, wizardry was *Imbuing*.

That's it! Their magic is somehow imbuing everything, for a single use. They need ingredients, imbuing needs them. Their spells take hours, imbuing takes at least hours, for a single use item. And each imbuing is different, because they use gestures and chants and waving the knife around. In a different sequence for each spell. I didn't know how good I had it! Imagine being a wizard, studying for ten years and diligently learning spells, only to be useless because your house burns down or something. Or needing to lug around a trunk full of crap just to do a little magic!

Now you know why they're all so grumpy.

They seemed to accept her explanation of 'energy,' and how it was consumed for her to do every bit of magic. The point was especially driven home when she demonstrated *Spirit Sense* and told them that's how she knew about the guild secret of the anthame.

"But seriously," she protested. "You wave those little knives of yours around for every spell, and you think someone isn't going to put two and two together? You can't be serious."

They just looked uncomfortable at that.

She put the spell of *Group Literacy* on them, a spell two grades higher than basic *Literacy*. That one was cast upon the self, and could allow her to understand a different

written language. This one allowed the entire group to read her book at the same time, so they could look it over and see what kind of spells she could cast.

“You can cast all these?” The wizards were impressed, they explained that even a master wizard’s book might only have a hundred spells in it.

“With a little time looking them over. I’ve read and understood a good portion of them, but I’ve only memorized fifty or so, meaning I can cast them without the book, and most in less than five seconds.”

“Fifty?!” They went back to muttering over the book. Susan caught “five seconds?” and “energy” and “This is like one of our spells! It’s Fendel’s Assassin I tell you!”

Finally they handed the book back and seemed dazed. They explained that no wizard worked any but the most basic spell *from memory*, it was just too dangerous. They always had their books open and consulted them for any spell taking more than a minute or two.

“So what are you doing here? Why has such a powerful person come to our world?” the head wizard demanded. Susan still hadn’t gotten any names out of the bunch, and wondered if they were hesitant to offer even fake names to a ‘wizard’ of her power. She had caught them talking about True Names when looking over her *Descry* spells, and wondered if names had power on this world, like stories sometimes did on hers.

“I think,” she finally ventured, “that I’m here to save your world from warlocks.”

One of the wizards smashed his fist into the table. "I knew we should have killed those people when we had the chance!"

"Quiet!" snapped the lady in charge. "Let's not rush off into another situation like this. We scrambled around without realizing the implications of coming here, and see where it got us? Humiliated in front of a whole town. Let's not charge after warlocks in the same way."

The man grumbled something Susan didn't catch, but relaxed back into his chair.

"Now let me make sure I have all this straight in my mind. You're some kind of warrior wizard from a world that uses wands primarily, but only ingredients for potions. You were born differently because one of your parents, your father, was from a different world that used magic differently. Your father left that world, because it wasn't his, to continue to fight this darkness being you're currently hunting down. This 'Darkvoid' creature. Which according to you is a being from beyond our reality and wants all the energy we currently enjoy for itself. It will accomplish this by taking something over, using that thing's native powers and supplementing them with power and knowledge it has gained from other worlds. If it wins the day, our reality falls and every possible version of everyone alive dies." Susan nodded. "So you have no interest in taking over, or disrupting our way of life, or anything like that?"

"Correct."

"Because you're leaving to look for your friend as soon as 'The Darkness' is dealt with. That much I get. So a little more than thirty years ago, something fell to our world and warlocks were created. You're concerned this 'The Darkness' and warlocks are somehow related?"

"I'm not. The being that sent me here, a being like The Darkness itself, mentioned that it was rather coincidental and I should look into it. Plus, coming in here has, perhaps inadvertently, given me a clearer picture of what just warlocky is."

"What is it?" demanded the man.

"First you have to have a bit more background. The reality is, The Darkness put a little piece of himself inside me when I was conceived, as a way to spy on me and exert a subtle form of control over me."

Hello!

"Not that subtle sometimes," muttered Sparkle.

"Hey, I can't say where it begins, but I have to believe my soul carries far more weight than it does in determining my personality. I don't know who I would be without it around, but I can't say I wish I was different. I am what I am, and I like being me. Now is that it talking? Who knows. Anyway, it talks to me, and it's been a blabbermouth ever since I got here."

You take that back you big meanie! Mom, Suzzy called me blabbermouth! Make her stop!

"It's never spoken as much as it has since I got here, and it expressed absolute joy that I was here, like some plan it had was going to work out better here than elsewhere."

Oh, it is. I'm still stoked about it.

"Shut up! Ahem, sorry. It's never done anything like that before. I later learned from Sativola that warlocks hear a kind of voice in their heads, and that's what they draw power from. Well, I hear that same voice, and I can draw power from it as well."

"You're a warlock as well?" asked the man. "You didn't say that before!"

"But I'm not. Look, I've been granted a skill because of my traversal of other realities, the *Adaptive Skill*. Basically I can intuitively pick up and use things unique to the reality I'm in without the bother of having grown up with it or whatever. So be it a different type of magic, or a language they use, anything that's unique to a world, I can use. And I can get better at picking up those unique skills by practicing, in general, with what is unique in that world. For example if it's a language and I practice that language, but the next reality has a weird swimming game everybody plays, it would translate over. Are you getting any of this?"

The wizards seemed to understand, and there was a general nodding.

Man, explaining things to non-Paragons is hard. All that to avoid saying 'I put XP into a special skill and I can use it on every world.' Sheesh.

“Okay. I first thought the voice and power were related to that skill, because warlock power was unique to this world. But here’s the twist- Sparkle has the same skill, heck she’s better at it than I am at the moment. *And she doesn’t hear the voice.*”

Everyone looked over at Sparkle.

“It’s true. I can’t move things with my mind like she can. We still don’t know exactly what the skill will allow us to do around here. Maybe your kind of wizardry?”

Susan put a palm up. “Doesn’t seem to be needed, anyway, all my magic works so I don’t need anything else in such a primitive world. The point is, as soon as I got into my *Dimension* here, the voice cut off. I don’t hear it anymore. And I can’t use warlocky either, I’ve been trying. Without that voice, the connection to whatever it is that gives warlocks power in this world, I’m just me. The reason this is all so important is because that voice sounds an awful lot like the voice of The Darkness. If the thing that fell all those years ago is offering your people power in this world... it’s not for your benefit. Because it’s been taken over by The Darkness, and who knows what it’s planning to do here?”

“So am I a warlock? No. But at the same time, Sparkle can’t use warlock power so it’s not *Adaptive Skill*. So I don’t know what it is, or why I can draw off that power as though I was a warlock. She’s the same type of magic user I am, and a *Spirit Mage*, so none of those things are a factor. The only difference- I have The Darkness in me, she doesn’t. What does that suggest to you?”

The wizards pondered this new information.

“She’s telling the truth?” the head wizard asked Sativola.

She nodded. “As she knows it. I’ve never felt a more confident person, I truly believe she thinks we are all in grave danger, and she is the only one that can save us.”

“Say this is all true,” said another woman. “What do we do about it? We can’t get close to the source, it would turn us and we would be caught by it.”

“Make warlocky illegal!” suggested the man. “At least slow the flow of warlocks to the north so we can make other plans.”

“You know as well as I do how that edict would go over,” the head wizard scornfully replied. “Besides, warlocky is a drug, they can’t stop using it. Especially those close to being called, they use it unconsciously, for everything. You know that.”

“At least if it was illegal, we could take action against anyone practicing it.”

“I wouldn’t want to fight a city full of warlocks,” said another man. “We didn’t when they first appeared, and I sure as heck don’t now! You must see that’s what it would turn into. It’s been thirty years, they’re established. They do good works. If I hadn’t seen her resist being turned to stone and blocking all our other magic, I wouldn’t believe her. I’m still not certain I do! How can we make warlocks believe it and give up their only way of life?”

The head wizard considered. “True, with preparation, we could probably pull off anything Susan could do, or at least fake it well enough they could legitimately say it was a trick to deceive them. They can’t sense magic like witches.” She nodded to Sativola. “It would be a hard sell, just putting her forward and saying ‘this is how things are.’”

“But a necessary one,” he argued. “There have been many theories why warlocks get called, what if this ‘Darkness’ of hers is creating an army of them?”

“Why wait thirty years?” she reasoned back. “The first people Called would be in their declining years or even dead by now. Even this darkness can’t control dead warlocks, right?”

Susan shrugged. “I don’t know what it can do, here. It depends on what it’s taken over. You say it came from space, is it some kind of alien? A non-human life form that actually calls the void of space its home? That would be pretty crazy, actually.”

“We don’t know that either, our magic can’t see it, and believe me we’ve tried. It still doesn’t make sense, waiting. Why not fly about, convert half the population, and make them slaughter the other half? It obviously can’t control their actions expect for the desire to go north. Not a very effective army.”

“What then?”

“Food? I mean it’s pointless to speculate, isn’t it? Even if it was eating them... the time

is still the issue. It can't be absorbing their magic, it's sending their magic." She shuddered. "Imagine trying to fight the creature that powers every warlock in the world!"

"Maybe it doesn't have that power itself? Maybe it's some interaction between us and it that creates warlocky. That could be why the Calling exists."

"It's been my observation that The Darkness waits for some event the world was going to experience anyway for the assault to begin. That's ranged from an ancient dragon busting loose from a mountainside to a reenactment of events that happened hundreds of years ago. I think it waits as a form of energy conservation. The native people get stirred up, but The Darkness itself doesn't have to lift a finger it doesn't need to, thereby saving energy. Have your divinations given any indication that something big is about to happen on this world?"

The wizards all looked around, but everyone was shaking their heads.

"So we probably have some time. Maybe I can talk to some warlocks and get their input. Until they go through this Calling, as it's called, they're still themselves, right? I'd be interested to see if any recognize me, or what they might have to say about the whole situation."

"We're going to have to debate this, and see what our next steps are. Can we speak privately?"

"You mean you want me to go away for a bit. Fine, I'll head down to the pond for a swim. Just follow the water down and you'll see it, it's not too far."

"Why don't you go with her, Sativola?"

"I'm not a very great swimmer... Oh, I see. Very well."

The two got up and Sparkle curled up in a corner, which the wizards didn't seem to even notice.

They probably haven't yet adjusted to the fact she's a person, and are ignoring her as though she was a cat. Their mistake.

The two girls followed the water downstream a ways until where the water collected into a small pond, where Susan shed her clothes and dived in. "Come on," she called, "the water is the perfect temperature, of course. I mean why wouldn't it be, here? And there's some neat caves I could show you under here."

"Actually, I can't swim at all," the other girl admitted.

"You don't have to, I'll let you breathe underwater with magic. And then we can practice, if you want to learn."

You just want to see her naked, remarked The Darkness.

Course I do, what's wrong with that?

"Oh, all right."

Yes!

Some time later, the head wizard came to get them, and both shook themselves off got dressed again.

"Thanks... for the lesson."

"Any time."

Back at the cabin, Susan sat down again and regarded the assembled wizards. They didn't seem particularly grim, so she was hopeful some agreement had been reached between them.

"We're going to give you a chance-" said the head wizard.

"Thank you."

"-to prove yourself."

"What?"

"The fact is, your appearance in this world breaks several guild laws. The first against more than one form of magic, as you admit to being able to use what seems to be wizardry, warlocky, sorcery, and have some of a witch's senses. The second about using what can only be wizardry, but not being a part of the guild. The third, using Ellran's Dissipation..." She paused as Susan looked puzzled. "You have spells in your book to destroy magic, that's illegal."

"Oh, so I do. But I haven't used it!" *Not around here, anyway. A courtroom back in my reality doesn't count. And besides, that was with government approval. Mostly.*

"Yes you did, after we arrived!"

"No, no, that was temporary. Magic worked there, just not your type of magic. Besides, wizardry works there again now, so nothing was destroyed."

"That's... well, but the fact remains you do break our first two laws. But you are here, and you can obviously turn aside any wizardry we can throw at you so we would rather just find out if this so called threat to our world is real, fix it, and have you go on your way."

"That is my goal as well!"

"Fine. You want us to trust you, it'll be on our terms. Our laws are typically absolute but given that you obviously come from outside our world..." She paused and glanced around again, looking at the modern kitchen appliances that took up part of the room. "We'll relax them, as long as you don't go flouting any more of them. We'll get you a copy at some point. Basically, don't kill anybody or use magical compulsion on them. And don't heal anyone that's involved in government either."

"I really can't promise that if some mayor falls and takes a blow to the head I won't immediately spring up and heal them. And who will really have the moral high ground if you start trying to kill me again for healing someone?" She gazed steadily at the wizard.

"We'll put that aside for now. For now, anyone that asks should be told you're a member of the guild, that'll satisfy our second law, even if you haven't been through our initiations. You do know some of our secrets, after all." She unconsciously stroked her knife. "Meanwhile, we'll assign you a series of tasks, and appoint a guild representative to, uh, smooth over any mistakes you make, not being a part of our culture."

To spy on you, clarified The Darkness.

"A witch and a wizard following me around? Maybe they'll even learn something about working together."

The wizard glared at her. "You said you had further business in this town?"

"Yes. The grandparents of the little girl you saw need to decide if they're taking her in. I'm giving them until tomorrow to work it out, and if they decide not to, I'll need to make other arrangements for her. Sativola here has said she'll take the girl in, if it comes to that. But I can't drag her around while I fight The Darkness so I'll have to find someplace she can stay."

"The guild could probably look after her for a time, in that case," the wizard grudgingly admitted. "She looks nearly twelve. Very well. Can you get to Ethshar of the Spices tomorrow?"

Susan shook her head. "Not sure where that is. I came in at Ethshar of the Rocks, and I can only go to a place I've seen before. I could fly there if you could provide a map. But depending on how far away it is, could take me more than a day"

"I see. It's some distance away, south west along the coast. In that case, go back there and head to Wizard Street. Ask for Telthalon the Wizard, he'll put you through a tapestry to the Spices. From there we can give you your tasks."

"Very well. And who should I ask for once I'm there?"

The wizard looked uncomfortable, but finally answered "Ask for Ithinia the Wizard."

"Thank you, I will. Now, if there's nothing else?" *Get out!*

"Not at the moment, no." The wizards all rose and pushed back their chairs.

"Then I will see you tomorrow."

Susan let the wizards out, then watched them disappear back into the mound of earth that rose up as Ithinia played that flute of hers. Soon it was gone again, and she headed back to the cabin. The wizards were *probably* gone, but she wanted to talk to Sparkle without any danger of being overheard. Going to the inn now would make her easy to eavesdrop on.

"So what's the real scoop?" she asked Sparkle.

"Basically they're going to throw you at the worst problems of the world and see if they can kill you off that way. If you survive, they figure nothing they can do will kill you, and they'll try working with you because your story, by means of process of elimination, must be true."

"Shouldn't be too bad then."

"Not too bad?" Sativola countered. "Are you crazy? Things wizards can't deal with... I

mean I've seen what you can do but how are you not upset about all this? They're basically trying to assassinate you by proxy!"

"That's what they think they're doing. In reality, they're just giving me a chance to gain XP. I know, you don't know what that is. Never mind that, for me going on adventures like this is standard fare, so I'm not worried. You want to stay in here the night? I have some beds in the cabin we can use, that I guarantee are nicer than what you would find at an inn. Cheaper, too. I won't charge you!"

"We might as well."

"Great!" She closed off the portal back to the 'real' world, and got out some paper. "I'm going to replace my *Spell Papers* for *Personal Dimension*, you can wander around outside, there's no dangerous creatures out there. At least, there better not be!" She laughed.

"I think I'll just turn in."

"Suit yourself. The beds are downstairs, because the sun never sets here and I wanted it dark. You can make a light, right?" She nodded. "See you tomorrow then!"

With her gone, Susan worked awhile on *Spell Papers*, not that she could make very many given the spell took eighteen minutes to cast from writings. But at the very least she could make three, two that replaced the two opening it for the wizards, and one to get out of it herself in the 'morning.' That done she tidied up from the wizards and went down to bed.

Her bedchamber had rows and rows of every sort of bed conceivable, as neither space nor material considerations were an issue here. She found one near where Sativola was laying and stripped off her clothes again to go to sleep.

She mentally reviewed what she needed to do the next day, *take care of Illina's situation, get the talisman back? Find Wizard Street, get XP.*

Should be simple, right?

The next day, Susan enlisted the help of Sativola, a local seamstress, and some *Creation* magic to make herself some clothes more resembling what the wizards were wearing the day before. Her *Alleviation* knife she now hung at her side. As everyone would be expecting to see a wizard with a knife, there was no reason to hide it.

This complete, she was finally able to walk around the town and get bows of deference rather than outright stares of bewilderment. So that was somewhat of an improvement. With that done, she went to go see Illina's family. She heard that weird muttering the instant she stepped out of the *Dimension*, and was somewhat revolted at how pleased she was to be hearing it again. She resisted the urge to levitate something, just to make sure that she still could, and asked Sativola to lead on to the house of the carpenter.

"We'll take the girl in," Yseult admitted when she arrived, without preamble.

"Oh? That's great, what caused this sudden reversal?" Susan asked.

"Never you mind. I said we'd take her in, didn't I? That should be good enough for you. Say your goodbyes and get out of here."

"It was the money," Glifieu put in. Yseult scowled at him. "Once she saw that pouch of coins her attitude changed sharply."

"You don't have to say it like that!"

"It's true though, and they did ask. Also knowing she had an apprenticeship lined up helped. Illina couldn't stop talking about it yesterday when she got back."

"And you didn't have anything to do with it?" Susan grinned at him.

"Oh no, I never get my way around here." He grinned back. "In any case, we'll look after the girl until she's old enough and Sativola comes for her. You, uh, do plan to do that, right?"

"Witches don't lie," she answered.

"True, but Illina could have misunderstood or something. Hearing it from you eases my heart."

"No, I think she shows great promise, I'll be back for her, I promise."

"Yay!" said Illina.

"Very well. I guess we'll leave you two to say goodbye, then. Thanks for looking out for her, I know you didn't have to. Having her here might make the death of our daughter a little easier to bear."

"Just... try to keep your wife from driving this one away, okay?"

He sighed. "I'll try."

"Here's the talisman back," said Illina, handing it over. "Thanks for everything."

"Of course," replied Susan, sweeping her up in a hug. "I'll come visit you before I leave, okay? You can here all about what other adventures I've had, how would that be?"

"I'll be waiting."

With their goodbyes said, the two young women and Sparkle stepped through a *Teleportal* back to Ethshar of the Rocks, and started to look for Wizard Street.

"Talisman first, then we'll find this wizard," Susan said, looking about. "You can read these weird signs, right?"

"Of course. It's against the law to be illiterate. Parents are punished quite harshly for not teaching their kids to read."

"Is that right? Interesting. Guess I don't just break wizard laws by my very presence here. Good luck punishing my father for it though, I don't even know where he is currently."

They found a shop that claimed to be run by a sorcerer, and stepped inside to be met by an apprentice. The place was simply and starkly furnished, brightened by a glowing, milky

white globe that stood on a small table in the center of the room. The boy was studying something at a desk, and jumped up when they walked into the room.

"Oh, a wizard!" He exclaimed. "And a witch. I, uh, I'll go and get my master then, shall I?"

"Do that," replied Susan, seating herself on the small couch at the other end of the room. The boy scampered off, through a door next to the desk. Moments later, a middle aged man came back into the room, smiling widely. He was dressed rather plainly, nothing so grand as the wizards were wearing the day before, and without a cohesive theme like Sativola seemed to be trying for. He did wear a vest with plenty of pockets, and some of them even bulged with something inside.

"Ladies, welcome to my establishment," he boomed, seemingly pleased to see them. Susan rose and took his hand, then Sativola did the same. "Not often you see a wizard and a witch traveling together. Please, sit! What can I do for you?"

He pulled the chair out from the desk, leaving his apprentice to stand there awkwardly, and sat facing the two girls.

"We were hoping to get more information about this," Susan replied, grabbing the talisman from her sub-space pocket and handing it over.

"Interesting tri- is that-" The man instantly forgot about the relatively minor matter of having objects pulled from nowhere as he took the talisman with trembling hands. "It is. It's a Fil Demisnicis. Where in the world did you come across such a thing? Does it still function? Are you looking to sell it? What sort of creature does it contain? Have you summoned the-"

"Whoa, one question at a time, please!" begged Susan, holding a hand up. "I take it this device is somewhat rare?"

"Rare? I've only heard stories, and even then they should have all been destroyed after the war ended. To find one intact... it is intact, isn't it?"

"If by that you mean a fire demon jumping out of it if the wearer is in danger, yes. Taking it down and getting it back inside the talisman proved to be quite troublesome, let me tell you."

The man goggled at her. "You fought it?" he finally managed. "And you're still alive?"

"Oh, I suppose I see where you might be skeptical. Believe me, I could have taken it out a lot faster if it hadn't been threatening a little girl at the time. I had to keep her safe, as I honestly believed if I didn't one shot the creature it would slice her throat without a second thought."

"No doubt it would. A fire demon, in my hands. Astonishing! So, you know what it does, you didn't need me to tell you that. Why are you here?"

"I want it destroyed, but in such a way that-"

"Destroyed?" the man interrupted. "Are you mad? I mean, no offense." He seemed to realize again that he was talking to someone most likely representing the guild. "No one in the guild wants it? I assure you, the the stories all say the demon can not act against the holder's wishes."

"You misunderstand me," Susan explained patiently. "The fact that it is so desirous is why must be destroyed. It was owned previously by a pirate, and if he had realized what he had at the time, he might not have been content to stay a mere pirate."

"Yes, I can see that. But now it's back in the hands of the guild... ah, yes, the prohibition on using two different kinds of magic, I see. Well, you aren't really using the talisman, it just activates, right? I mean I don't know how strict the guild is about this sort of thing..."

The two girls looked at each other, wondering how much to tell the man.

"In any case, can it be safely destroyed? And what happens if we do?"

"I suppose you could set it down and smash the crystal to pieces with a hammer. Then melt down the metal, that would destroy it completely. I assume you would want no part to remain, to provide even partial clues as to how it was constructed?"

"That would be best, yes, but my main concern is the demon inside."

"Would probably perish, but I don't really know. As I've said, I have nothing to compare it to."

"So it could let the thing out to rampage?"

"Oh. Yes, I suppose it could, now that I think about it. I would say there was an equal chance of that happening. I don't know how they were all dealt with after the war. Are you sure I couldn't buy this from you? I know my house wouldn't be enough, but perhaps my house, all my wealth, and we could set up a sort of payment plan at regular intervals until I've given you enough?"

"It's worth that much?"

Sativola put a hand on her arm, and Susan heard her voice inside her head.

You have to realize, and a wizard would know this, that a lot of knowledge was lost after the war. Some was forcibly erased, by the guild, some just because things were discovered during the war, not written down lest they fall into enemy hands, and the people that knew them died. This might be one of those, so the potential for learning how to make them again makes this far more valuable than the object would imply.

Can you hear me, too?

Yes.

Nicely done! Why can't they just work it out again on their own? They did once...

It's not that simple. Average lifespan of a wartime researcher was less than thirty days. Many people died trying to research things. And something like this, that combines sorcery and demonology? The guild would certainly frown on something like that in peacetime. They couldn't stop it while the war was on, but...

Oh. Got it.

The man was looking between them, wondering what was going on.

"Never mind, I see what you mean," Susan said to him. "Are you sure you want to own an object that combines sorcery and demonology though?"

The man twitched in his chair. "Hadn't considered that. Though again, the sorcerer wouldn't be using demonology depending on your interpretation of the law..." he trailed off.

"Yes, tell me how wizards interpret their own laws."

"Perhaps you should just have this back." He handed it over again.

"So the control is absolute? If the demon comes out it must obey and protect the person that wears it?"

"From what I've heard of them, yes. But of course it was war time, and demons would have reveled in combat anyway. There would have been no need to disobey an order to fight, they would gladly do so, to kill humans."

"I see. Is there anything else you can tell us about it?"

"Not without a lot of study."

"Very well," said Susan, getting up. He got up too, putting the chair back over by the desk. While he did this, Susan got out a gold piece and tossed it to him. "The information was very valuable, thank you for your time."

"Oh, certainly!" he said, glancing at the coin and making it disappear into one of his many pocket. "And if you change your mind about selling it..."

"You'll be the first to know. Good day."

"Good day!"

Once out in the street, the two walked some ways away with Susan staring at the thing and thinking about it.

"You could take it down again," Sativola remarked. "If you wanted it smashed up. Just take it to your world and release it there. You can fight all you want there, no one in the way, right?"

Susan shook her head. "It would fight all the harder, there. It would have nothing to lose." *And way more energy than I have, and did I even see all that it could do? Somehow I doubt it.*

"So what will you do with it? Just take it out of the world when you leave?"

"I could." Susan considered. "And having a demon at my side for my battles would be useful, if what the guy said was true. For all we know the hold a person has over the thing weakens every time it comes out, and that's how it got away from the original owner. He was

killed by it. There's just a lot of things to consider."

"I guess you're right."

"Is it for us to decide?" asked Sparkle. "It really has nothing to do with our mission, right?"

"I suppose you're right. Here, stop a minute." Susan spread the chain and dropped the necklace over Sativola's head, then gently gathered her hair out of the way so the chain touched her neck.

"You're giving it to me?" she squeaked, holding it away from herself.

"For safekeeping. The only people that really know about it are the people on the two boats. Hopefully none of them will come after at, knowing what that would mean for them. And you can see them coming, right?"

"I suppose. And hopefully it wouldn't need to come out that often, no one attacks a witch. Word would get around and witches would never care for a person they knew had hurt one of their own if they came asking. So generally we're left alone."

"And it can't come out otherwise, sitting around in a chest, and being carried by the pirate who knows how long proved that."

"You have a point. All right, I'll take care of it." She tucked it under her shirt.

"Great! And if you decide it should be destroyed, perhaps a demonologist could assist you, as they would know how to deal with unruly demons. Until your world is safe, though, keep it handy. The Darkness doesn't care that you're a witch, after all.

"Now that we have that settled, let's find this Telthalon the Wizard."

As the shops all had the name of the practitioner (and some indication what they knew how to do) he wasn't difficult to find. And as he had been told to expect them, he brought them up to his second floor and set his knife against the door. He spoke a few words, then brought out a large iron key which he turned in the lock. Then more passwords (or something) were muttered, and he threw the door open. Inside was a bare room with a large tapestry hung on the wall.

And nothing else.

The tapestry hardly looked like cloth, Susan would have said it had come from a high resolution printer from her world, it was so detailed. Of course, the scene itself wasn't that interesting, just a blank wall somewhere.

"Go on through," said Telthalon.

"Go... through?" asked Susan, confused. "You mean step through? It's not really big enough."

"Have you never- but of course you probably haven't, not many do. Just touch it, that's all that's required."

Susan shrugged and reached for it, but her fingers never seemed to brush against it, as suddenly the "picture" expanded and she was staring at the full wall that had been shown in the hanging."

Now what?

She reached a hand out and felt the wall in front of her, but it seemed perfectly ordinary. Someone cleared their throat behind her, and she whirled, startled. There was an older man, in wizard's robes, sitting at a desk and surrounded by what Susan could only imagine was wizardly stuff. There were vials holding different colored liquids, and dried insects, and leaves, and other random bits and bobs scattered about the desk.

"Susan?" asked the man.

"That's me," she replied.

"Come forward then. Your friend can't come through until you move."

Seems like a rather bizarre restriction, but then, I wouldn't want her to teleport into the same space I was occupying.

Once she moved, Sparkle and Sativola appeared, and the wizard sent a small dragon looking thing flying down the hall to let someone know she had arrived.

"Why the wall?" asked Susan as they waited. "And this tiny space?"

"If someone ever got ahold of that tapestry, they would come here. This place is easy to defend or change or block off should that happen. Depending on what I thought was

needed," he indicated the ingredients on the table, "I could do all three with the wizardries I know."

"Sensible." *Though why they just don't have a public service, that opens to a public area...*

Because the image in the tapestry has to match the image at the other end, explained Sativola mentally. *That's why it was pointed at the wall. The wall won't change, so the magic always works.*

"Oh. Like how I had to move out of the way! They couldn't just put it in the town square, because that shifts second by second, and the effort put into the thing would be wasted!"

She nodded.

"What?" asked the wizard, looking between them.

The two girls grinned at each other, Sativola because she knew a type of magic no wizard even knew could be done, which was turning out to be quite useful. Susan because she realized Sativola realized it too.

"So wait, I could paint an X on the wall and the tapestry would be ruined until it could be cleaned off? Or the X put into the tapestry somehow?"

The wizard nodded cautiously.

Every day, in every way, my magic looks better, and better.

A few minutes later, another wizard joined them and said he would take them to see Ithinia, who was expecting them. They walked through an underground tunnel to some stairs, then up into the main meeting hall of this particular building, where Ithinia and another wizard were waiting, already seated. They had passed many rooms, some with people working inside, some giving instruction to young kids, some doing paperwork. All in all, a pretty busy place.

"Glad you could make it," Ithinia said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Sorry, I had stuff to do this morning," countered Susan. "You knew that, I told you yesterday."

She waved it off. "Never mind, you're here now."

Wizards probably aren't used to waiting, thought Sativola. *She figured you would come straight here because that's what any other person working with the guild would do.*

Then she doesn't know me very well yet, Susan thought back with a grin.

"I'm here now," she said aloud. "And ready to see what you've come up with for my tasks."

"Great. They are two fold. The first, though you can do them in either order, is to make some lasting contribution to wizardry. I've seen your book, I know your spells are powerful and you can do most anything. If you really want to help us, prove it by finding some way of making our wizardry better. I realize you don't do true wizardry yourself, but there must be something, and an outsider would probably have a better chance of seeing something obvious than we would. I believe you mentioned something to that end for witchcraft, and Sativola here?" Susan nodded, it was true after all. "Then you can do no less for us. Plus you claim to have visited other worlds, perhaps something from another world could be useful to us as well."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Fine. The second, and more dangerous, is to travel to the kingdom of Reldamon, which lies on the eastern border of the small kingdoms. We've been getting odd reports from that corner of the world, rumor has it that an actual demon took over the kingdom some years ago. We've never had any way of proving it, as we've not tested our magic on demons all that much. And our scrying efforts just show the same old king walking around. But twice now while we were spying on him, late at night, he got up and went to the castle basement where our spells lost him. Hours later he came back and they picked him up again.

"Prove his being a demon one way or another, and find out what he's doing in that castle of his."

Given Sparkle said they were going to throw me at the most dangerous thing they could, they probably already know he's a demon and just don't want to confront him directly. Still, if he's anything like the last one, I can take him. I just have to make sure he doesn't take

any hostages.

“How do we get there?” asked Sativola. “Even the western edge of the small kingdoms is pretty far from here.”

“We can send you to Ethshar of the Spices, where you can take a boat across the gulf of the east. From there, you’ll just have to fly. The guild doesn’t have a lot of presence in the small kingdoms, and certainly no tapestries to waste to make the journey.”

And they don’t want to take the effort to do that flute thing?

Hey, you’re the one who claims to be so powerful, said The Darkness. You don’t need their ‘lesser’ magic, now do you?

Susan ignored him. “But hopefully some sort of map can be provided, so we don’t sneak into the wrong kingdom?” asked Susan. Ithinia handed them a rolled up parchment, which Susan took a look at and saw it was a map of the area. “Ah. Thank you.”

“Certainly. Will you leave now? I’ll instruct everyone here to cooperate with your questions when you’re ready to see what you can do for wizardry.”

“This seems more urgent, and I’ll have to think about what I can do for wizardry. You did say you were assigning me someone, right? I can question them during our journey, maybe start work on something during the trip down there..”

“That seems reasonable. He’s been sent for... oh, here he is now.”

“Here I am,” said the boy who came down the stairs with a traveling bag. “I’m Kelder the Apprentice. You must be Susan, nice to meet you.”

A short journey to Reldamon

Place: An inn halfway through the Small Kingdoms

Time: That evening.

The group had made good time on their way to Reldamon, Susan simply flying them over the gulf despite Kelder's insistence he wouldn't dare try such a thing. Susan simply left him behind and he was forced to catch up, and made it over the water without further incident. Once into the Small Kingdoms, he insisted on crossing the borders properly, rather than just flying over them all, to Susan's annoyance. But they didn't call them "small kingdoms" for nothing, and walking through them didn't take long.

They were now seated at the inn, waiting for their food to arrive, and Susan figured now was a great time to get to know her new "keeper."

"So, did you volunteer for this mission, or what?" she asked.

"No, I was assigned it. And while I appreciate your wanting to get there quickly, don't rush on my account."

"You'll want to get back to your studies, won't you?"

"Oh." He colored. "I'm not really that great a wizard. I think that's why they made me come with you."

"Because they know I didn't need magical backup?"

"Uh, no, because I wouldn't be missed."

"I see. What's the trouble, exactly? I've helped people figure out why they're bad at magic in the past. Well, once, anyway. It wasn't what everybody thought, I'll tell you that."

"It's not so much that I'm bad at casting spells, exactly. I can get through most all right. It's just my master didn't know all that many to begin with. It seems like a recurring problem, actually. When I'm considered ready to train someone the only spells I'll have to hand down are the ones my master gave me. I don't want to deny someone the craft if they want to learn, but it almost doesn't seem worth it."

"And the guild won't give you more, round out your book?" He shook his head. "That's nuts. I suppose you'll tell me there's some reason behind it," she said to Sativola.

"Hey, I'm with you on this one," she replied. "I'm going to tell as many witches as I can about what you've taught me, and keep looking for ways to use my magic. But then, none of what I'll show them is all that dangerous."

"But wizardry is, right. Still, a wizard with a bunch of grade 1 spells is still better than a wizard with spells that are all over the place in grade. They can't be that dangerous, and still more useful than not having them."

"You mean first order? You never can tell what a wizardry will do if you mess it up. Even very basic magic can go wrong fast. Remind me to tell you about the pillars of flame sometime."

"Okay. Well, if you can do magic, just not a lot of it, I'm not sure I can help."

"Actually," put in Sparkle, "maybe you can."

She looked down at her. "You think?"

"Sure. Remember, wizard's spells are written down. They don't memorize them like we do, they get them out of the book every single time. While you can't exactly steal a better wizard's book, you have something much more convenient."

"The *Research* spell," she breathed, realizing her intent. "Just like Tom reading Hermione's diary long distance. Of course!" Susan put her hands under the table to hide the light, and spent four minutes gathering the magical energies. She got a thirteen on the check and handed Kelder the new, ghostly book of wizardry she had just conjured out of the air. As she had asked the magic for research relating to "currently practiced wizard's spells," she was confident it would contain actual magic rather than just topics about researching spells. She saw that she was right as Kelder looked it over. (She had cast it for him specifically, so the language was his. She wouldn't have been able to read it without casting it again for herself.)

"Where did you get this?" Kelder asked, excitedly paging through it. "These are spells, with the ingredients and words and everything. I don't believe this!"

"You watched me. It's a spell of mine, I made it just now. It'll vanish when you're done

though, it won't stick around forever. Probably when we get up, in fact." *Yeah, this dinner would be a 'scene' wouldn't it?*

"You can just bring knowledge out of nothing?"

"No. I can bring together writings relating to a certain subject. I couldn't ask the book for wizardry that didn't exist, though it could show me notes made by wizards in pursuit of spells. That could help guide someone through the spell creation process."

He closed it and shoved it back. "No thank you."

"What?" All three exclaimed, not believing their ears.

"You're trying to bribe me with this, but I won't fall for it. I'm going to report exactly what you do and how you do it. Because that's my job. I may not be a great wizard, but the guild is relying on me so you can't tempt me, even with this."

"You sure about that? I'm not worried about what you're going to tell them. Even if they don't like it, there's nothing they can do about it. But I'll do what they ask to the best of my ability, don't you worry."

"So you say. Take it back."

"Very well." Susan ended the spell, and the book vanished. "If you change your mind—"

"I won't. I'm going up to my room." He pushed his chair back.

"Very well," replied Susan, leaning back in her chair. "Hope I don't slip out the door the minute your back is turned, now that I know I can't buy your loyalty."

He froze, half out of his chair, then sat back down again. "Maybe after another mug of ale..."

"Oh, don't tease the poor guy," admonished Sparkle. "She won't leave without you, don't worry."

"And I'm supposed to believe some talking cat?"

"I thought I had a pretty honest face," she remarked, fluffing her whiskers out. "What about me tells you I might lie to you?"

"Of course you're going to say what she wants you to. You're traveling together."

"And what about me?" asked Sativola. "If I told you she had no intention of leaving without you, would you believe me? I'm from around here, unlike Sparkle, so there's no reason for me to mislead you."

"I..." He looked her over, and she was smiling slightly. He looked away. "Fine, I guess I'll believe you. See you in the morning."

"She really didn't want to bribe you," she said as he got up. "She just wanted to help. Believe me, I followed her around a whole day as she helped people out, back in the Village of Dawn."

"It's fine, I said." And he was gone.

"Guess I messed that one up," Susan remarked, feeling a bit bad.

"You did just want to help," countered Sativola. "I could feel that."

"But he couldn't. And all because the *guild* won't let people study magic properly. It must be nice, being a witch, telling if people are being truthful or not."

"Sometimes, I guess. Other times I would rather not know. Like when either of you looks at me..." She broke off. "Anyway, guess I'll get to bed, too."

Susan reached for her arm as she got up, but then pulled back again. "I'm sorry, for that. I guess it must be pretty distracting."

"I'm kind of used to it. From men, anyway. It's okay."

But both girls knew, without witchcraft, that she was lying.

"You didn't pick up *Lecherous* at some point without me realizing, did you?" asked Sparkle when she had gone.

"What? No, that would be way worse. I just think she's cute, that's all. I can't help it if she picks on up that, now can I? Usually I would get RESolve checks against her picking up that sort of thing, but it seems to work differently here, so, she'll just have to live with it."

"I guess you're right. Someone with *Lecherous* would throw themselves at anyone they found attractive, I guess. But you do seem to do that, a bit. Yuffie. That general back in Louise's world."

“Uh, yeah, I’m seventeen. Not forty seven. And when I find Luna... well, okay, she wouldn’t mind me looking I’m sure. I don’t have to explain myself to you!”

“You do when I think it might be The Darkness making you act a certain way.”

“What, this? Come on!”

“No, don’t just ‘come on’ me. What if she does find out you’ve been trekking across worlds and getting a little on the side? Would she really be okay with it or would she be jealous? If she leaves for you it, your big anchor against The Darkness disappears, right? And maybe that’s what it’s hoping for.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” she said testily, even while knowing Sparkle could be right. *Do I really know Luna well enough to say how she would react, one way or the other? She couldn’t be jealous of people that don’t even exist in our reality though, could she? And I’m just looking, darn it, Sativola isn’t interested. I’m not jumping into bed with every pretty girl I see on this journey.*

“I hope you do, for her sake as well as yours.”

Susan had to think a second, and remember Sparkle couldn’t read her mind. *She was saying that about keeping it in mind, not about... yeah.*

The next day the group, not speaking very much to each other, passed through Okkoa and continued east. The trouble was just as they reached their destination they ran into a brick wall... literally. They couldn’t go any farther, as the kingdom had a defensive wall stretching as far as they could see in either direction.

“I suppose you would be against me just *Phasing* through the wall and entering Reldamon that way?” Susan asked Kelder.

“I’m not sure what that means, but if you wish to enter the kingdom illegally, go right ahead. Just know that I will be putting that in my report.”

“Ugh, fine. We’ll find the actual road in. It must be close. Excuse me!” she called to a passerby. “Which way do we go to get over this wall?”

“Wall?” The man looked over at it. “Oh, that. Oh, can’t get there from here. You’ll have to go north, through Neya and Ptelaya. That’s where the only road leading into or out of Reldamon is.”

“What? Why?”

The man shrugged. “Wall just went up some time ago. Who knows what other kingdoms are thinking? Wall is a stupid idea, sure, troops would find it hard to get in if they wanted to invade, but they can’t get out either if they wanted to invade us. So it helps us just as much as it does them.”

“Why this Ptelaya or wherever?”

“Because Ptelaya is smaller then Reldamon, and every other kingdom on their border is larger, I guess?”

“Oh. Well, thanks.”

“Sure.”

“What did he say?” asked Kelder.

“We have to go around,” replied Susan, sighing. “There’s only one road in or out, and that’s through this other kingdom. Come on.”

So the group skirted the wall and headed into Ptelaya, where the gate was leading into Reldamon. Approaching it, she saw the break in the wall was covered by a thick iron grating which presumably would be moved aside to let people in or out. At the top, set in the center, was an ornate orb which seemed to be glowing brighter as they approached. The people on the other side had been mostly just standing around, but after one noticed the glow and pointed it out, they all leapt up and got their weapons out.

“What’s all the commotion about?” yelled Susan through the bars.

“You’re magic users?” demanded the man with the bare sword that walked up to them.

“Yeah. Two wizards and a witch. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“What, just the three of you?” He looked back up at the sphere, which was now too

bright to look at directly. "We don't allow magic users in our country. Go away."

"You... what? Look, I'm Susan the Wanderer, I go around helping people with my magic. We mean no harm."

"I don't care if you're the supreme wizard of the wizard's guild. We don't allow magic here, as is our right. Turn around and go away!"

Sativola touched her shoulder and pointed, and Susan saw soldiers manning the walls, bows drawn and ready to fire down at them.

"So that's how it is," she remarked.

"You understand now? Can your magic save you from that? We don't want you in our kingdom, so scram!"

Susan didn't bother replying that yes, yes it could. She didn't want to antagonize them. Yet. "Guess we'll be on our way, then," she said instead. "Nice talking to you."

"Just move along. And don't try sneaking in any other way, this is the only portal through the protection spells around our kingdom."

"Well, now you've just piqued my interest. Maybe I'll just fly over the wall someplace, how would you like that?"

The soldier smirked at her. "I invite you to try it," he said smugly.

"As long as I've gotten permission then." Susan spun on her heel and walked away, followed by laughter as the soldier passed the word she was going to try flying over.

Something odd here, what do they know that I don't?

The group moved a little ways away, and Susan did a *Magic Sense* on the wall, getting a ten on that and a twelve on *Magical Theory*. The *Sense* check was one above what she needed, so she worked out the spell was some kind of analog to Sun magic dealing with protecting the town.

"That glowing ball must be a talisman of some kind," remarked Kelder. "Letting them know when people that can do magic approach."

"And they got pretty worked up," added Sativola. "I doubt they had ever seen it glow that brightly before."

"Come on, I want to try something." Susan and the others walked some distance away from the gate and she found a stone and picked it up. With her augmented STStrength she was easily able to arc it over the wall, where it slammed into a magical barrier and bounced back at her. "Oh, that's what he meant."

"So now what?" asked Kelder. "This seems to lend credence to the theory something is going on inside the kingdom they don't want people to find out about."

"We go inside," replied Susan, matter-of-factly. "We didn't come all this way to get stopped by a wall."

"You aren't going to just smash your way through, are you?" asked Sparkle.

"Please, give me some credit. There's so many ways through this wall I can't even begin to count them all. It's just a question of how much effort to put in, and how noisy we want to be. Given your two natures though..." she looked between her companions. One didn't want to fight because she couldn't do so without feeling her opponent's pain. The other probably didn't have any combat training, and carried little in the way of supplies anyway.

Unless these people can make bottomless bags like they can back home? "I think as quiet as possible is the watchword." Susan opened a *Teleportal* back to where they first had encountered the wall. "Come on, we'll head back to where we first saw it. They won't get word all the way back there for some time, so we can attack it at our leisure."

The group stepped through, and Susan regarded the structure. "I think the easiest way is just *Phase*," she decided. "Everyone join hands, sorry Sativola, and we'll make our way through that way."

Kelder gave her a funny look, like "why sorry?" but did as instructed. Sparkle jumped up on her shoulders and Susan cast *Phase*, sticking her hand through through the wall to walk through it.

It didn't push through.

Susan had to admit she was impressed, they had even thought of that? "Okay, never mind, we'll try something else." She dropped the spell and considered. "I'll just fly up, take a

quick peek, and *Teleportal* us over there.” She did, but *Teleportal* fizzled when she tried to open it past the wall. “Now that’s funny.”

“You don’t think it’s a form of *Fortification*, do you?” asked Sparkle, getting ten on *Magic Theory*.

“Fortification we’re going to Miami!” Susan joked. The two humans stared at her, uncomprehending. “Never mind. It’s possible, I just hope it doesn’t stop us from entering with hostile intent. Because we have that, if the king here really is a demon. Let’s see what else I can come up with...” *I could try Transposition, I didn’t see any boxes or anything on the other side. But that’s still a Mercury spell, and lower grade than Teleportal. Relocation would work, the way is clear, but again, if it blocks one kind of teleport it will block them all. Susan tried Sculpt, but opening a hole just showed the same effect as trying to go over the wall did. A vague magical barrier that wouldn’t let her put a hand through. And I would have to target each brick, anyway. I thought maybe Magic Immunity would work, but making a hole big enough, that’s the problem. Can’t shrink us down, we’ll be immune to magic at that point. It has to be big enough to crawl through, and that’s not going to happen trying to move each brick out of the way.*

What about Elemental Travel? Wait, could I have gotten through the spell I put on Ron’s house just by walking through the wood or the glass? Probably not. Nor could I have stepped through from the astral, so that’s out.

“Okay,” Susan decided at last. “We’ll wait until it starts getting dark. I’ll need to read up on a spell, and this will seem totally out of character, but we’re sneaking in.”

“That is out of character,” admitted Sparkle. “You think there’s no way to get in through the wall, huh?”

Susan shook her head. “Not that I can think of. I thought maybe I could cancel out magic at the gate, but it can’t be *Domination*, that specifically says spells, not all magic. The orb would still light up. So it would have to be *Dead Magic*, and then I couldn’t unlock the gate if they recognized me. Nope, it’s going to be up to you, Sparkle, to do the first part of our plan.”

“Wow, sneaking and having a plan which involves me? I approve.”

“Oh, quiet, you. Come on, let’s find a place to sit down so I can read something over. Tonight we enter the kingdom of Reldamon.”

Remembering to Save

Time: That evening, just after dark

Place: Outside the wall

“Ready, Sparkle?” Susan asked.

“Ready.”

“Then let’s go.” She pulled two *Spell Papers* from her pocket and activated the first, “*Save*” and the second while the others were touching her. “*Unseen*.” Magic swirled around them all, with the *Time Anchor* staying there on the ground and shimmering with magical energy. To her companions, everything but that seemed unchanged, but they were all now completely invisible to those without some supernatural power. Normal people would walk right by them, though they were fully visible to each other.

“*Somnolent Smog*,” Sparkle cast, taking all the time she could and putting in extra energy. She got a dome forty eight meters across, due to the eleven *Spirit Manipulation* check and presence of two moons in this world. With her thirty nine check there wasn’t a thing anyone could do about it, and every person on the other side of the barrier fell over, asleep. The four waited a moment, making sure no one would stir when the spell was lifted, and Sparkle nodded that that the area was clear.

“*Unlock*.” With that, the iron barrier was no trouble to lift and quietly move out of the way. Of course, the crystal at the top was blazing away, but no one was out at the border this time of night to notice it. (Susan hoped) With the group inside, Susan set the barrier back into place and looked around. It seemed that, not unlike most places she had seen in this world, this place might once have been fortified and grand, but now was rather run down and falling apart. The courtyard beyond the gate was mostly open space, but with high barricades at regular intervals in a half circle facing inward. They had slits in them, probably for shooting arrows out of, and Susan could also see the platforms the archers had been standing on when they threatened her earlier. The “kingdom” proper began somewhat off in the distance, difficult to judge in the near darkness.

“They’re going to know something happened,” remarked Kelder. “All of them falling asleep at once is pretty obvious.”

“But when they do, we’ll be long gone.”

“Where?”

“What do you mean, where?”

“Getting into this town obviously isn’t easy. Anyone coming in is going to be noticed. We’re strangers here, and any inn we try to stay at is going to ask some uncomfortable questions as to how we got here. Everyone in this town probably knows everybody else, because there’s next to no traffic in or out.” He explained this like he was explaining something to a two year old, and Susan had to admit he was right. She probably should have thought a little more ahead.

“Hey, my plans are always one step a time, okay? We’re in, now we figure out what to do next.”

“Isn’t that just another way of saying you have no clue what you’re doing most of the time?”

“Guys!” hissed Sativola. “Someone’s coming!”

“Probably someone outside the spell, coming to see what’s up. If it’s a soldier they’ll raise the alarm,” moaned Kelder. “Now what?”

“They can’t see us, remember?” chided Susan. “Just don’t go stealing his helmet or whatever and they’ll walk right by us. Come on, let’s look around for a place to stay, unless you want to try sneaking into the castle tonight? It’s not that late, we probably should do that anyway, to not waste the spell.” She started walking, and the others followed.

“Do you think we can make it to the castle soon?” asked Sativola. “We don’t know where it is, after all.”

“Probably the middle? That’s where I’d put a castle. True, it’s not like we can just ask someone. But we’re in, we could just fly about and find it. Actually, don’t you know where it is, Kelder? The wizard’s guild should know, they sent me here after all!”

"Excuse me," said the man behind them.

"No, they didn't give me a complete map of the kingdom, it's not that large. And don't I recall you saying something about not needing any magical assistance from me?"

"A map isn't magical! Though they didn't tell me about the gate either, so maybe they're not big on small details?"

"Excuse me," the man repeated. "You're trying to get to the castle?"

"No, the guild worries about major threats, and big picture stuff. Keeping a bunch of magic users from killing each other isn't all that easy, you know? Especially with warlocks and demonologists running around. Plus making sure that old wizards aren't getting too senile to cast-

"Excuse me!" shouted the man, and the group whirled to look back at him, then froze. It was a soldier, but awful large for just a man. He wore the standard breastplate and helmet, sized up for him, that the unconscious soldiers they had passed wore. His eyes seemed to softly glowing red, and a large blade, much thicker and wider than normal hung at his side. Both sides stared at each other a moment, the night silent.

"Oh great, so much for your mighty magic," complained Kelder at last. "Look, he's looking right at us!"

"That... shouldn't be possible," protested Susan. "I know the spell is still working, I can feel it. That guy's a magic user!" She pointed dramatically. "In a kingdom that doesn't allow magic users! You're going to so get it when we tell the king on you, buster. You want to buy my silence, I require fine pastries, and lots of them."

"Something's wrong," Sativola said nervously, taking a step back. "He feels off."

The man looked over at her. "Oh, a witch, is it? And what about the other two, are you witches as well?"

"I represent the wizard's guild!" Kelder said haughtily. "You'll turn around and leave us in peace if you know what's good for you."

The man laughed, unconcerned. "I have no fear of wizards, especially here. And what about you, little one?" he asked Susan.

"You'd better do as he says," Susan replied, "Or you're gonna have a bad time."

"Oh, I don't think so. The witch first, she's the biggest danger, if she can be called even that," said the man, drawing his blade. A small sphere at the top of the hilt, just below the guard, began to glow. "You wizards will need to draw your knives at a minimum to cast any spells, I'll have her killed by then. I think I'll keep the other girl alive for questioning. Though the boy would probably break easier, he's not looking too good just from the sight of me. He's no warrior."

"Oh dear," said Susan, turning away from him. "He's gone and underestimated me. Plus he thinks a warlock needs to draw a knife to cast a spell!"

"The girl is touched in the head, she's no warlock," said the man, zipping his sword through the air as though taking practice swings with a bat. "I can see her knife from here, and no self-respecting warlock would dress to look like a wizard."

"We have to get away!" insisted Sativola. "Something is really, really, wrong here!"

"Believe me, I can take him. Just step back a little-"

"We can all understand him, but what language is he speaking?"

Susan paused. There *was* something odd about his words, they didn't sound right, but Susan was used to hearing odd languages and knowing what they meant thanks to Inari. But this guy...

"Very good, little witch," said the man, giving a mocking bow. "Did you know, demons have their own language, which can be understood by all mortals? I managed to hang onto it when I fused with this man here. Not all can, you know. What we hold onto seems almost random, at times. Maybe one day we'll understand why."

"Shatra!" squeaked Sativola, nearly stumbling as she backpedaled.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Kelder, sounding if he was trying to convince himself more than anything. "They were all killed hundreds of years ago. He's just trying to scare us."

"Know that for a fact, do you?" asked the man, grinning a wide grin at him. "And of course no more could be made, right? Lost art, and all that?"

"Is that what the so-called king here is doing?" asked Susan, watching the sword.

“Making some kind of half-demon creature?”

“So called!?” the man said, clearly offended. “He took over this place fair and square. If you really want to know, I can introduce you to him and he can tell you himself.”

“That would be ideal, thank you!”

“Certainly. Just let me kill your friends here, and, oh, of course you’ll have to be in chains. I’d better blind you too, just to be sure. Won’t take a second.”

“I’d like to see you try. You two, get out of here. I’ll meet up with you somewhere, after I’ve taken him out.”

“No, you mustn’t! It’s a Shatra, you can’t win!”

“I took down that fire demon, didn’t I? In fact, shouldn’t he be coming out about now?”

“He hasn’t directly threatened me yet?”

“I guess. Look, just go. I’d rather he not take you hostage.”

Sativola seemed torn between trying to make Susan understand, and running away as quickly as possible. Kelder took off, hardly bothering to notice where he was going, and as Sativola turned the man lunged at her with a speed Susan wouldn’t have thought possible. She tried to get in his way, and Sparkle called out “*Deflection!*” but neither was good enough and Sativola didn’t even get a chance to cry out as the man’s sword did eighteen damage to her body. This cut her in half quite effectively, and Kelder screamed in horror as he turned around after hearing the pieces of her hit the ground.

The man smiled. “Next?”

Susan, having failed her CONstitution check with a six to not vomit as her friend’s entrails and viscera splashed everywhere did the only thing she could do.

She mentally triggered the *Time Anchor*, and suddenly everything was as it had been moments before. Both her friends were alive, she was holding the *Spell Paper* of *Unseen* about to be triggered, and the night was silent. She didn’t want to vomit anymore, and forced the memory of seeing her friend chopped up to the back of her head before she grossed herself out enough to have to make another check. *It never even happened. They’re both right there, healthy and whole.*

Healthy, whole, and screaming, that is. Sativola started to scream like she was being murdered (she just had been, after all) and Susan clamped a hand down over her mouth.

“Quiet!” she hissed. “You want to make things worse?” Her breath came rapidly, and her eyes were wide as they darted from place to place, trying to understand what was going on. “That was just a... dream. A practice run. We know now what not to do, that’s all!”

Note to self, do not include companions in spell when saving. Alternatively, explain what spell is going to do beforehand. To do otherwise just makes things more complicated.

“What just happened?” asked Kelder, also looking around. “Where’s that Shata? Did she just die? How did we get back out here again?”

“Not helping!” Susan hissed at him. “Calm down and I’ll explain, all right?”

Eventually Sativola started breathing normally again, and Susan took her hand away. “It’s called *Time Anchor*, or saving on some worlds. Basically you choose a point in time and can go back to it if something bad happens. Some friends of mine showed me that their world had these points in space you could anchor yourself to, and my book analyzed them for me. Now I can do the same thing, but anywhere. Luckily I remembered this time, you looked pretty far gone when that thing hit you.”

“Pretty far gone!” Sativola was still a bit hysterical. “I died, in case you didn’t notice! I was dead. How can I have been dead, and now I’m not? No magic can bring back the dead!”

“I didn’t, it’s time, I just reset time. Look, you want to do this tomorrow? I can see it’s shaken you up a bit-”

“Shaken me- Do this tomorrow- Are you stupid? There’s a Shatra beyond those gates. If there’s one, there are probably more. Didn’t you see what happened?”

“I’m not just going to do the same thing as before, that would be dumb. Get a grip. I’ll go in expecting a fight, and you guys hang back here until it’s over.”

“It killed me in one blow!”

“That wouldn’t even scratch me, believe me.”

“Wait a second,” demanded Kelder. “You seriously have magic powerful enough to

perform a bunch of actions, then decide if you got the best result or not, and if you didn't you just snap your fingers, *reset the entire universe* and try again?"

"Pretty much. Don't you?"

"NO! By the gods, no wonder you're so unconcerned with the wizard's guild. What other spells do you- no, don't tell me, I don't want to know. But I'm with Sativola, we should just report back that there are Shata and let the guild handle it. Only one man has ever faced one and lived, according to stories. Kelder of the Enchanted Sword. No relation."

"Well, soon it's going to be one man and one woman. Me. They gave me a job, and I mean to see it through."

"You're nuts."

"I've been saying that for years," put in Sparkle. "But have a little faith, she does know what she's doing."

"Thank you. Now, you keep saying Shatra, Shatra, which honestly translates a little dirty in my mind. What is it? It just looked like a big guy to me."

"It's partly demon, partly man," Kelder explained.

Partly metal, partly real? asked The Darkness.

What?

Eh, never mind. Before your time I guess, and they didn't remake that one. Odd, that, they remade everything else...

Whatever you say.

"And somehow, better than both," continued Sativola. "You saw the size of the sword he was swinging, and how fast he moved. *When he killed me!*"

"You seem fine now, you don't have to harp on about it."

"Harp on about it? You mean that dying I did? When he chopped me up and it really hurt and stuff was flying out of me and then there was darkness and-"

"What's the big deal? It never happened, I tell you. If I hadn't included you in the magic you would never have known. I would have just reset things and explained we needed a new plan. Or just armored up and had you hang back from the start."

"Oh, that's even worse! Is my soul still in my body? Are the gods going to strike you down for messing with forces no mortal should consider?"

Susan shrugged. "They haven't yet. You wanted a story, and I did warn you about traveling with me. If you want out, I won't blame you." *I'll miss you, but I won't blame you.*

Ugh, traveling with just a guy? That doesn't sound very fun...

They stared at each other, but Sativola let her breath out slowly and slumped her shoulders. "No. I have to see this through, I promised myself that. Just... warn me next time, okay? Time magic. Gods!"

"Deal. So can we get on with this?"

"You're really going back in there?" asked Kelder. "If 'back' is even the right word, as technically we haven't gone in once... this magic is confusing."

"I really am. With tons of magic activated this time, but still, I'm going all the same. We'll do the same plan, put everyone to sleep, get inside. You two follow the inside of the wall to the... left. I'll stand there with my big 'ol flaming sword and attract this half-demon's attention. When he's dead we'll move on. Simple as that."

"What happens if he kills you? Can you still trigger this time magic of yours?"

"Probably. If you want to be on the safe side, I'll give the *Paper* to Sparkle, and she can trigger it. The thing won't go after a cat, after all."

They all looked down at her. "Fine with me," she said.

"Then let's begin part two," Susan said, getting out another *Spell Paper* and setting it on the ground for Sparkle to step on. "I've got a half-demon to take out."

Susan watched as the pair disappeared into the darkness under the platform past the gate, and turned to walk boldly in the direction she figured the half-demon had come from. She was *Accelerated*, had on *Augment Skill: Sword* and of course with the sword out she was her usual *Avatar of War*. Sparkle waited several paces behind her, just in case it should go bad again, and Susan resisted the urge to shout a challenge to the creature no doubt lurking around nearby.

After all, I don't want to wake anyone from their nappy time. They would just get in the way here.

She waited.

How long until that guy found us last time, anyway? It was right past the gate, right?

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Sparkle, looking around.

"Here, Shatra, Shatra, Shatra! Come out and play... you monkey. Come on, I dare you. Where are you anyway? Hello?" She lowered her sword. "This stinks. You don't think he bravely ran away, away, do you?"

"Maybe to get some more of his half-demon buddies, or warn the king something that looked like you was strolling in past the front... what's that?"

Something came bouncing out of the darkness towards Susan, and thunked against her legs. She almost jumped away from it, but she was sure this kingdom hadn't developed gunpowder or anything like that without anyone noticing. She looked down at it...

It was Sativola's head.

"Oh, come on!" she shouted to the figure that stepped into her line of sight. He was holding another head, Kelder's, and had his sword drawn and ready. She gestured with a free hand, like she couldn't believe he had done that. "Seriously?"

"What?" said the Shatra. "You didn't expect me to just charge at you first, did you? Not even I'm that dumb. You should be thankful, you get to get ahead in life... twice in one night!" He started to laugh like he had told the best "that's what she said" joke ever.

Susan screamed in frustration as the magic took hold of her again, and once more her friends were standing there with her.

"*I died again?!*" shrieked Sativola.

"*I got killed that time?!*" shrieked Kelder right next to her. "*You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?*"

Susan sighed. *This is going to be a long night.*

Man, The Darkness said, wistful, never have I so wished for hands as I have tonight. I can't figure out if I should do a slow clap or get some popcorn for the show.

Shut up!

If at First you Don't Succeed...

Place: Still in front of the gate

Time: Still just about sunset

"Wait a second," reasoned Susan, looking at Sativola. "You got killed?"

"Yeah, we've been over this," replied Sativola.

"Hey demon, yeah, you in the talisman! Get out here!"

The stone in the talisman glowed, and Sativola lifted the chain so it was not under her blouse anymore.

"You called?" it asked, suddenly before them.

"Yeah, why didn't you protect her? She's your master, right, and protecting her is the whole point of your existence now. I'm getting that right, aren't I?"

"Protect her from what?" he asked honestly, looking around. "She hasn't been attacked. You've just been standing around here gibbering on about getting killed, but it never happened."

"You- But that's-"

"He wasn't included in the spell," remarked Sparkle. "He's technically just a piece of jewelry when he's not out."

"I guess you're right. Fine, go back again."

"What? I just got out! Isn't there something I can beat up before then? I'm bored!"

"You want to take the Shatra?"

"Shatra? There's one of those freaks still wandering around? I'll see you later." He was gone.

"Coward."

"Even true demons flee before them?" asked Kelder. "And I will be reporting a witch has a *sorcerous* talisman that houses a *demonologists'* workings."

"You won't, if you know what's good for you... apprentice."

"Are you threatening me?"

Susan slowly leaned over, eyes narrowed. He leaned back, a little scared. "Yes."

He swallowed. "Oh, right, I kind of thought so, just- just making sure. Uh, yes, carry on then. Man, having someone around that doesn't fear the guild is *hard*."

"Tough it out, big guy. Anyway, what happened? Think he just killed you too fast for the demon to react?"

"I don't know," insisted Sativola. "One minute I remember walking, the next I was dead, and then I was back here."

"Super. Well, you two are staying as far back as you can when that gate opens again. Getting you killed three times in one night would truly border on the excessive."

"Just the once was more than I cared to experience," she muttered.

Susan turned back to regard the gate. "We need a new plan. I may just have to bust in there as per my usual MO. Draw the thing out so he doesn't go looking for you two. Not that he knows you exist at the moment, of course. But he could have some weird senses, and that's why he knew you were around." She absentmindedly fingered her *Wizard Bracelet*. "I just wish there was some way I could be sure and not kill any of them!"

"Why not *Knockout?*" suggested Sparkle.

"Yeah, I could do a *Burst* or five, but that takes energy. It's bright, noisy, and if it doesn't hit them just right they could take multiple hits and still sound an alarm. I figure I better save my energy for these half-demon things running around."

"Please don't say you think there's more than one," Sativola breathed, aghast.

"Me, I'm the kind that plans for the worst," Susan explained. "I mean, it would be quite silly to think otherwise, am I right?"

"I guess."

"There is still one way," ventured Sparkle, looking thoughtful. "It's somewhat of a risk, but maybe we want an alarm raised in any case. Get as many soldiers here as they have, take them all out, and finish this quickly. Then you won't have to fight your way through the

castle, or the streets. All the soldiers will have fallen here, at the gate.”

“Go on, oh faithful *companion*,” prompted Susan.

“*Elemental Weapon*. Wouldn’t that be perfect for you? You can swing as hard as you want, use *Slash-All*, and after you cast it you just have a weapon in your hand, so it’s not bright or loud.”

“And it can’t carry over into lethal damage!” Susan exclaimed, having gotten her book out and opened to the spell. “That is perfect. I take out everyone near the border, then when Mr. Halfsy shows up, I drop that spell, pull out my blade ‘o fire and doom and cut him to shreds. I like it.”

“And it does double damage,” Sparkle reminded her. “Yes, you lose one third in the end, but with your *Giant’s Soul* don’t you do insane amounts even taking that into consideration?”

“That I do. Okay, give me a minute guys, I want to look something over, see if I’m spending 5 XP for a new spell right now (*she has six currently*) or just losing some spells I don’t use anymore.”

She happily got out her character sheet and started looking her spells over, leaving the other two pondering where she pulled that from. (And indeed, what she was actually talking about anyway)

She was about to turn it over when she noticed something new in the "Notes" section on the front. Apparently, she had gained six "warlock energy" and the Calling would take place when she failed a RESolve check, difficulty 5 + 1/1000 of this energy total. *Hey, that makes sense. If a normal human became a warlock, they could easily fight off the compulsion at the ten level, and that's five thousand energy collected from warlocky. Even someone with a normal RESolve and a little energy can hit fifteen rather often, right? No wonder it takes twenty years for a warlock to be Called, they would have high RESolves because they don't want to be called, and thus raising that stat despite the expense. If it even works that way for them, but I suppose there must be some way to do. Anyway, guess I don't have to worry about not using it, it'll take a long time to fail my 2d10 + 10 check!*

She flipped it over, now looking at the notes section on the "back page" where her spells were recorded.

Thinking about it now, my spell list is a little out of date. I've been focusing too much on physical combat, I guess. Like Alleviation. I have the knife for that, what would I possibly spend ten minutes casting that for? Do I need both Light and Darknight? Sparkle knows Regeneration, why would I need to know it? And then there's Autonomous Assistant. I remember using that way back, to do chores around the house for me. Because magic! Would I need that spell on the road?

I guess now that I think about it, having a person sized "ghost" I can call up from nowhere could be fun. Like I could send it to wreak havoc in the area beyond the gate, moving things around and making the solders believe the place was haunted. They couldn't attack it, after all. What to do...

I only used Path Tracer once, thought it would come in more handy. That I could do from the book, it's only grade three! And Scribe, that's grade two and not useful now that I don't need to take notes anymore in class.

Susan quickly looked over her skill section. *Have to get rid of my pistol skill, I don't have that gun anymore! Wonder what else I can... anyway, first things first.*

She willed *Scribe* and *Path Tracer* off her character sheet, effectively “forgetting” how to cast them, and now had 5 XP to learn another spell with. She spent a few minutes going over *Elemental Weapon*, cast as a Neptune spell so it would be made of “solid” *Knockout*. That done, she cast the spell, boosting her skill to a ten so it could cut anything. *Not that I expect to run into anything it can't cut around here.* It took the form of an enormous sword, like the ones she saw Cloud swinging around. *After all, I've got the STRength to lift it, may as well go as gaudy and flashy as possible.*

Not to mention ludicrous, put in The Darkness.

You're right, there was no need to mention it.

“All right. You two, hang back someplace way over there until I signal you.” Susan

waved her hand vaguely in the direction of the town. "Sparkle, you can handle the *Anchor* again, but don't bother with *Smog*. This time these guys are going to *know* they are under attack."

"Your call. I'll back you up if something tries to sneak up on you though. Even you aren't invincible. Oh, but I will put on *Acceleration*. Wait, let me activate this first, just in case something else goes wrong, we'll return to this point before we activated stuff. Save us the energy."

"Good point." Susan waited while she did, then said "*Augment Skill, Invulnerability*," as she activated two of her charms. "*Slash-All, Speed Up!*" she also cried, activating her *Materia*. "That should do it."

Susan once again *Unlocked* the gate, and this time met with cries of alarm as soldiers scrambled to keep it closed.

I don't think so, boys, she thought, getting a 32 on her STrength check and sending them all flying back. *Actually, now that I think about it, there were a lot of people put to sleep around here before. Is the border usually this well guarded, or did they increase the number of people around here because I tested the gate earlier and lit up their little detection sphere up there? Oh well, who cares now?*

Susan stepped past the gate, where the waiting soldiers squinted at her, unable to believe their eyes.

"What's the meaning of this!" demanded someone with a fancier breastplate, walking up to her.

"I'm declaring war on your kingdom," she told him. "Surrender or bring me to the person who can."

He stared at her a moment, then burst out laughing. "Okay, who put her up to this?" he called, turning around. "Kelder, was that you? Get out here you guys, I want to know who did this!"

Kelder again?

He was still laughing and looking around when Susan flipped the grip on her sword so she was holding it overhanded rather than under. With it held up she made a called shot to his body and slammed the blade through his back. Her attack easily bypassed the +8 bonus the armor provided to keep him from being hit, sliding cleanly through his entire body. (The blade was huge, after all, no joke.) This did forty eight damage to him, and he didn't even whimper as the blade knocked him out. He crumpled, and every soldier there fully believed the somewhat cute girl everyone thought was a joke had somehow, impossibly, killed their captain. From behind, like a coward. In one attack, like a monster. Without remorse, also like a monster.

Reason went out the window.

They charged. (Well, most of them, he wasn't universally liked, of course. In fact he wasn't very well liked at all, but he was the captain so he should be avenged, right?)

Susan smiled, dropping into a crouch, as she again shifted her grip on the blade. As the soldiers got near she rolled *Initiative*, and struck.

As with the wolves in the world with Nita, she did a called shot to the body of each man, rolling an eighteen for the action. Of the six currently rushing her, two managed a complete dodge, which Susan had to admit was rather impressive. *Not that they should get one at all, given they've never seen anything like me, or this attack, before.* The others seemed to have a ghostly sword impact their armor, which hardly slowed them down. Of the six, only one went down, with just enough damage to render him unconscious.

Great, as it impacted their armor, and it's technically trying to target the spirit, they don't even have to make STrength checks to remain standing. As much damage as I would have done to the armor, had this been anything but Knockout, probably would have blown it off. As this only damages people, they're all unhurt. And it didn't even feel like they were attacked, I bet. She sighed. *And I really wanted to conserve energy...*

Ugh, I'm so stupid! I can pluck energy from their comatose bodies later, I don't need to conserve it.

Those still running got another step forward before Susan swung again, this time putting energy into COOrdination in order to hit better. A more pleasing twenty six was achieved this time, and again they tried to dodge. None managed it, and this time all but one man went sprawling, to his great surprise. He pulled up short and regarded her.

"So, is it your great speed that gives you the confidence to believe you can take over our entire kingdom?" he asked, keeping his sword up in a guard position.

"Speed? Oh, you think- not just that, no. Though I am pretty proud of my speed, why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if you could dodge arrows?"

"Arrows?"

That's when the rain of arrows hit her from behind, as the soldiers on the platforms above her opened fire.

Of course, with *Invulnerability* going they bounced harmlessly off, leaving the swordsman's mouth hanging open.

"Why would I need to?" she asked, swinging her blade as she swung in a circle. As she did she noted the positions of the archers on the walls so the swing could target them, which it did. Another ten energy used, and she got a thirty two to hit them all in the body. (There were seven in range) Their maximum roll was a thirty three, and again only one was left standing, an archer at the limit of her range.

He gave a shriek of terror, flung his bow into the air, and did a runner out of sight along the platform.

More arrows struck her from the slits in the walls before her, and she wondered if just knowing someone was there was enough to target them with *Slash-All*. She shrugged, decided not to experiment at the moment, and sent a sixteen meter radius "*Elemental Burst: Knockout*" starting at what she considered the middle of the barricade lines. (She got a fifteen *Magic Combat* to get the distance right.)

No more arrows were sent her way, so she casually strolled over to the nearest fallen man and cast *Energy Drain* on him. She got three actions worth of energy before the Shata casually stepped into her field of view again.

"They were right to station me here tonight, it seems," he remarked, looking the bodies over. "Odd though, they don't seem dead." He tossed the man he had been holding by the neck roughly to the ground, where he sprawled like bad rag doll physics in a first person shooter game. "What's the matter, can't handle a little blood?"

"Oh, I was saving the bloodletting for you," she replied, letting go of the sword and causing it to vanish.

"You're going to fight me with your bare hands?" it asked, amused.

"As much as I owe you a beating, no, I was just getting out my other sword."

"Do I know you? And what other sword, I see you carry no other. Though where did the one you dropped go?"

"Aren't you just a Curious George? I'll make you deal- I'll tell you if you win. *Blade*."

With that, her *Crystal Sword* came into her waiting hand, and she charged the creature before it could register much surprise. With her current speed of twenty four it was going to take her one segment to reach him, which gave a being as fast as he was plenty of time to bring his blade up. This, again, had taken on an odd glow from the sphere set by the guard. (Her reach was greater, now being a plus one size modifier, so while he was five meters away, she only needed to be within two meters to hit him.) Her only real concern was that glowing orb.

Just a smaller version of the one on the gate, or does that give his sword special properties?

She didn't want to take the time to do *Magic Sense*, figuring she would just take whatever he dished out, and strike him back without bothering to dodge. That should cut him

down, making the point moot.

They struck each other at the same time, both hitting as neither bothered to dodge. Susan felt his blade bite through her armor but didn't do more than nick her body, while her blade easily sliced through his left leg by doing fifty one damage. (This was only four more than the attack needed, so it was actually quite close) Amazingly, he remained conscious even as he screamed and went down.

"I'll kill you!" he promised.

"You don't even have a leg to stand... oh wait, you do. Shall I fix that for you?" She raised her sword again.

"I won't give you the satisfaction," he snarled, and plunged his sword into his own chest. "Die," he managed, ripping the blade through his body.

Susan stepped back, surprised.

"How am I going die when you've killed yourself?" she asked his corpse. She looked at him from both sides, wondering if he had another form he was going to take, but no, he was quite dead. She reached for his sword, wondering if it was better than her own, when she noticed a whine in the air, and the body started to glow.

Okay, that can't be-

The world disappeared in fire, and Susan stumbled and fell as the ground beneath her feet slagged with an astonishing ninety one damage. In fact, everything up to seven meters out, including people, the walls, the ground, even the air took this much damage. Susan couldn't even make a *Gymnastics* check as she fell 3.5 meters as the ground simply disappeared underneath her, the flame too intense to see through. It cleared in seconds, leaving her staring up at the sky and thankful she was immune to fire in this form.

"Susan!" came several voices a moment later, and she saw the heads of her friends peaking over the new hole in the ground. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she shouted back, getting up. "What's it look like up there?"

"You better see for yourself!"

Climbing back out, Susan did just that. The glowing sword was gone, she figured at least several people were dead, that one the Shatra had thrown down at the very least. *And after all those pains to keep them all alive.* "We'll have to reset, try something else," she said sadly. "Those people don't deserve to die just because I beat up a Shatra."

"You better do it fast," said Kelder, "I hear people coming to see what that explosion was."

"You sure?" asked Sparkle. "You'll have to do that all again."

Susan nodded. "We'll find some other way. Maybe I can just *Knockout* him, too?"

"You got it, boss."

Without another word the night was as it had been a second after Sparkle had activated the spell.

"So what happened?" asked Kelder.

"I wish I knew. I sliced his leg off, he fell over, stabbed himself in the chest, and foom, fireball city."

"Never heard of Shata exploding like that. They were supposed to be expert fighters, and much faster than a man, but that's all they had going for them."

"We could ask a demonologist, I suppose," said Sativola. "Do you think it was the sword that made him do that?"

"He hit me with it, and I didn't burst into flames. Of course, I'm immune to fire so maybe that's it?"

The three looked at each other, none having any answers.

"Was he immune to fire though, that's the real question," posed Sparkle. "If it was the blade, and if hitting someone makes them explode like that, you have to imagine he would be."

"Right, it would be too dangerous to use otherwise. But man, he couldn't use it except when he was fighting alone, he would roast any allies!"

“He’s a demon, you think he cares about allies?” asked Kelder.

“Oh, you’ve got a point. Look, let’s call it a night. We can attack tomorrow or something, this just isn’t working and we need to think of a new strategy.”

“I’m sure we can find an inn somewhere,” said Sativola. “Come on.”

That night, Susan worked on remaking the few *Spell Papers* she had used, and asked *Question* if the sword of the Shatra she had fought hitting something caused it to burst into flames. She got back a “no” answer, and wondered exactly what *had* caused the man to expire in such a dramatic fashion. With that done she stripped off her clothes and fell into bed.

“How goes it?” asked the wizard in her dream.

Not Expecting Her

Time: About an hour after Susan fell asleep

Place: Susan's Dream

Susan looked around, not understanding how she had come here. The room was unfurnished, uniformly lit without torches or lights, and didn't seem to be quite real. In a flash, she realized why.

"Dream magic," she said, looking over at the wizard. It was a man she had seen before, but of course she didn't know his name. He had been there during the talks in her *Dimension*, which made sense. *He would need to have seen me to use the magic to get into my dreams, of course.*

"Ah, you're familiar. Good, that saves some time. So, is everything all right?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Our wardings indicated some rather odd magic going on in your vicinity, but we couldn't trace it afterwards. So we figured we would ask, make sure nothing too serious was going on."

"Do you call Shata serious?"

"Shatra? What, there? Impossible!"

"Tell that to him. My two companions seem terrified of him, and whatever he is, he isn't human. Looks it though, so what else could he be?"

"Perhaps you better start at the beginning."

So Susan told him about the wall around the kingdom, and the barrier it was generating. Also how she had attacked the gate several times that night and lastly how he had killed himself rather than allow Susan to kill him, and exploded afterwards.

"I've never heard of a Shatra exploding in flame, especially one that burned hot enough to melt the ground that far out. Troubling, very troubling. Of course there's a lot we don't know about them, and why should we? They were all killed a long time ago and we thought the method for creating them had been lost."

"Apparently not. Unless this one has just been alive ever since then?"

"Possible, I suppose. We don't know how long they would have lived, either. Well, as far as him exploding upon death, did it happen immediately?"

Susan considered. "No, I would say there was maybe a two second delay? I was *Accelerated* with magic at the time and I was out of combat time so it's tough to say."

"Combat... time? Anyway, the solution seems clear to me. Just fling the body skyward with your warlockly. You do have a warlock's magic, don't you?"

"I do, but I've been hesitant to use it. For obvious reasons."

"Still, using it for this won't be harmful to you."

"I guess. I'll have to try it beforehand, see if I can actually lift a man sized object with it. If not I can use my magic, I know a similar spell. Anyway, that's for me to plan."

"If you even wish to continue," he said, holding a palm up.

"Why wouldn't I? You guys did give me a mission, and I plan to see it through. I've not gotten anywhere close to the castle yet."

"But you've proven something is going on there, which is what we wanted. This barrier and a Shatra running around... both add up to one thing."

"But they won't let you into the kingdom, and they'll know you're coming because of that jewel thing at the gate. Sure, you could force the issue, but not as well as I can. And they obviously have wizards on their side, even if they aren't allowed inside, to maintain the wall."

"True. Well, if you're determined to see it through I won't stop you. Just stay safe."

"Of course."

"Let us know if the guild can help at all, you can get back to us easier than we can get back to you."

"True. I'll let you know."

"Good night."

In the morning, Susan and Sparkle talked strategy for what they wanted to try that day. "Why not just use your favorite, the *Hypnotic Pattern*?" asked Sparkle. "It seems to me that he probably exploded with a force equal to his energy total. If you just drained his energy, that explosion might not even happen!"

"True. I thought about it, but honestly, that feels cheap."

"Cheap? Whatever keeps you alive in combat, that's what you do, right?"

"Normally, yes. But the thing is, remember our goal- rescue my father. He's supposedly more powerful than me, right? I mean you traveled with him..."

"True. He had the staff, and other backgrounds you don't. He probably had roughly the same number of spells memorized, and he copied the book before he left it with you. So we can assume he's more powerful now than when I left him."

"So I need to be *better*, rather than just more powerful, is my thinking. That means learning how to fight, and probably without magic. Given that if my father wasn't trapped in some dead magic zone, he would have already busted out."

"I can accept that. But doesn't that just mean raising your *Sword: Slashing* skill?"

Susan shook her head. "That's how I *attack*, not how I *fight*. I need to be in many different kinds of battles, so I have experience fighting, not the XP kind. Being in different situations, working through problems, that's what I need most right now. On my world I just powered through people because my magic was so superior to theirs. They didn't use weapons, and I could become immune to anything they threw at me. Out here there are more weird powers and different ways to attack me, I can't possibly anticipate them all. I mean exploding when you die- where did *that* come from?"

Pokémon? asked The Darkness.

She scowled and ignored him. "Anyway, I didn't consider it and look what happened? I should have thrown him into the air just to be safe. But I didn't, I stood there with a dumb look on my face wondering what was going on. If I hadn't been immune to fire, or if he exploded with ice or something, that would have been the end of me. I need to get better at acting in the moment, and anticipating powers I've never encountered before."

Sparkle nodded. "You do well on the planning stuff, at least when you know what you're up against."

"And now I know. Let's think of a way to get rid of that guy and not have him explode a bunch of innocent townspeople."

"Is just throwing him in the air the solution?"

"There's no spell to seal him off, like a reverse *Shell*. That just makes a barrier centered on the caster. I need one with range M rather than range P. Probably grade seven though, forget it. Though a grade 2 version that can move, and be enough to keep off rain or snow..." She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "The point is, what do we know and have now, without learning anything new, that can work? Do I just hit him with *Knockout*?"

"We can't assume he won't explode just from going unconscious though, think of *Spell Trigger*. If he set something like that up, to explode his enemy when he couldn't fight anymore... heck, he could be immune to fire too, and never planned on dying in a one on one fight. That was just a precaution in case he got knocked out, and he just happened to use it that way!"

"Shoot, that actually makes a lot of sense. Oh, what if I *Phased* him after he died?! I'm immune to fire, it would pass through everything without hurting it."

"That could work. I could also be flying overhead and you could just *Transpose* me with him when he died."

"I'd get a better bonus doing it that way, from having *Acceleration* up. I could cast it faster. Yeah, that's certainly an option."

"Here's another- *Elemental Line: Pluto (Ether)*. He can't succeed on a RESolve check if he's dead. So he's guaranteed to get shoved into insubstantiality when hit."

"That stuff ignores armor, too, doesn't it?"

Sparkle nodded. "Yup. It's only useful in a handful of situations, and I forget exactly why I picked that spell up in particular."

"Some sort of crowd control maybe? Cutting down on the number of enemies we might

have to fight? It must have been before I got *Slash-All*.”

“Yeah. Maybe when we go back to the Hub I’ll take a good look at my spells, maybe rearrange them a bit.”

“I was thinking that exact thing last night! Weird. Okay, do that. I’d rather not be next to him if I can help it, even if I am immune to fire. Seeing blast coming towards me was not fun. It went fast, so even *Accelerated* it wasn’t in slow motion or anything, but I knew it was going to hit me.”

“Got it. So how are we getting in? Waiting until nightfall again?”

“No, let’s just do this.”

“*Overconfident*, huh?”

Susan winked. “You know it.”

So Susan used another *Time Anchor* and the group went out to “sneak” into the kingdom again. This time, Susan had her flaming sword in her left hand, the sword of *Knockout* in her right. She still had all the spells from the night before going, like *Invulnerability*, and again there was a commotion at the gate.

“I am declaring war upon your kingdom,” Susan repeated, having really liked the sound of it the night before. “Open this gate and defend it.”

“But if we don’t open it,” called the captain from the other side, “we don’t have to defend it. That’s the whole point.” The other soldiers nearby, and at the top of the wall, shouted their appreciation for this logic. They believed that even this giant of a creature couldn’t breach their walls, and in security was confidence.

Susan had to admit that *was* a good point. She couldn’t batter the gate down, it was no doubt as resistant to attack as the stones in the wall. And her hands were full of swords, and it would look bad to drop one to open something as simple as an iron gate. But she hadn’t used her warlock abilities in a while, so she looked the gate over.

Wait, is it really worth it? she asked herself. *Eh, it can’t hurt, right?*

She could see, in a way she didn’t really understand, the inner locking mechanism that secured the gate. *I wouldn’t be able to do this with Telekinesis magic*, she thought, twisting it with warlocky. *I couldn’t see it that way. But when I draw on this power, I can. How weird is that?*

With the lock twisted (and broken so it couldn’t be relocked) the spikes that drove the gate into the ground retracted and Susan was able to shove it aside before the surprised guards could react. That was two uses of the power, and she was now up by two energy and feeling good. *But I can’t start to rely on it in combat, as I’ll only have it on this world.*

Not necessarily, countered The Darkness.

What do you mean- no, never mind, I have these soldiers to take care of at the moment.

Suit yourself, just remember to ask me about it later.

Sure, sure.

Susan again easily tore through the regular soldiers, keeping an eye out for the big guy, but standing there draining energy from the downed men, he didn’t appear.

Not on duty? she wondered.

“What’s that?” asked Sparkle, and Susan looked to find her pointing with a paw. She looked down that way, and floating towards her was a curious looking woman. She was tiny and unarmored, in fact she wasn’t wearing much of anything apart from rags. These rags didn’t seem tied around her or secured in any way, but they clung to her body as though glued there. The only ornamentation she carried were two bracelets and a choker, the bracelets set with blue stones, the choker with green. Her eyes were also covered with a cloth, so Susan figured she was blind or saw through some other, magical means. Her long, white hair billowed out behind her, and she seemed to bob almost lazily towards where Susan had been fighting. She was almost the size of a child, as close to being a -1 size modifier as the big guy she had fought the night before was to being a +1. The area around her seemed to fall a bit quieter at her approach, and she stopped, hovering, a few meters from where Susan was standing.

She put her hand out and the sword came back into her grasp, becoming sheathed in fire again. "I expected the big guy," she said, "don't tell me they made woman Shatra as well?"

The figure put a finger to her lips as though inside a library, and said nothing.

"You are a Shata, right? Not just some weird, floating woman?"

Again, there was no reply.

"ANSWER ME!" Susan shouted, and was shocked to find the woman darting towards her much faster than she would have thought possible, hands catching her two hands so she couldn't easily swing her swords. Her legs went around her waist, locking together and the woman smiled, looking quite beautiful.

Susan tried to take a breath to say "Oh, you want to fight, huh?" but found to her amazement she couldn't breathe, and that was going to be a problem.

As she didn't have much air in her lungs, she was treated as suffocating immediately, meaning every five segments she took a nonlethal point of damage to the head. Not much concern in the short term, given her ENDurance of eight, but somewhat embarrassing if she needed to reset again because of it.

She rolled *Initiative* and started her counterattack.

She couldn't exactly slam this woman into the ground with *Wrestling*, she was still floating, Susan couldn't feel any weight on her despite the woman grabbing her. But she could rip her way free and dodge back again, get her breath back. *I'll just shove her like I did the pirates, that will break her hold on me and give me some 'breathing' room.* She contemptuously made a STrength check to tear away from the woman's hands, but was astonished when the gems in the woman's bracelets glowed brightly, and she failed to pull away.

I just failed a STrength check? Impossible!

But it was possible, and Susan's delay went up by two for the action. *Fine*, she thought, *I'll just do magic.* The woman did nothing but stare it her, that grin on her face which now seemed a little creepier.

"..." Susan said, trying to cast *Phase* to get away. But no words came out, and as she hadn't tried to cast non-verbally the spell didn't even go off.

Fine, have it your way.

Sparkle, meanwhile, was waiting for her to do something, having a Paragon's awareness of the two actions she had taken. *I think something might seriously be wrong! Can't use Line it might hit her, but there is something I can do.*

She took to the sky, having cast *Flight* on herself earlier as part of the "get the exploding guy away from the town" plan earlier. She came down on the woman's head, and she couldn't exactly dodge as she held onto Susan. "Elemental Touch: Kn-" Just as she went to touch the woman her voice got cut off, and the spell fizzled.

Oh, that's why! Crap!

Susan took her first non-lethal to the head, an unpleasant experience, and decided to just throw energy into something, as usual. *After all, I have plenty of downed soldiers to pick from to get it back. In fact, that gives me an idea.*

She wordlessly cast *Transposition*, aiming at a nearby soldier, and putting in maximum energy. Even taking no time, her penalty of -2 for not saying the words still put her minimum result at a twelve, and her difficulty was an eleven. She was rather surprised when that didn't work either.

Now what? Oh, right, I need to gesture to do magic, too. It's so automatic I don't even think about it most of the time, I've never really done a physical spell while having both hands pinned. Expect for that one time I was pinned under those slabs of rock back with Nita. And I used Phase for that. Guess it's Phase after all.

Sparkle went at the same time, rising above the woman and shouting down "*Thrust,*"

intending to break her hold by driving her into the ground. The magic hit her with a twenty two result, but the gems simply glowed again and she held on doggedly.

Okay, what?

Her next action, Susan got an eighteen on *Phase*, and the woman dropped away from her. She took in a relieved breath, then shouted "Don't let her touch you!" up to Sparkle.

Sparkle cocked her head, it looked like Susan was saying something, but certainly she remembered that after using the *Phase* spell, which she had obviously just used, no one else not *Phased* could hear her.

In any case, the woman tried again and again to grab onto Susan, but simply passed through. She seemed to be silently screaming in rage.

Sparkle could now cast *Line* without fear of hitting Susan, so she did. "*Elemental Line: Wind*," she cast, doing it instantly and relying on her bonus from *Acceleration* to make up the difference.

The woman easily dodged it, flying up to grab Sparkle who had just screamed something at her.

Sparkle saw her coming, and outdistanced her, flying across the line again, hoping the woman would be stupid enough to follow her. The woman got a twenty one on her *perception* check to see the line, and a seventeen to reason out it might not be a good idea to touch it, and started heading around.

(In her haste, Sparkle had completely forgotten that flying creatures were immune to the *Line* anyway. Whoops!)

Susan dropped out of *Phase*, nearly swung with her left hand to cut the woman down with her real sword, but made a REASON check of twenty to realize that might be The Darkness trying to influence her. She switched to the other, not wanting to kill this woman who, for all she knew, had been implanted with this demon against her will.

Really rather have Long Range going for this, rather than Slash-All. Oh well, it'll work out.

Except it didn't, she got a thirteen to hit while this was one from the woman's minimum to dodge, and she got a sixteen which was still a terrible result given her stats. *Shoot, she's a slippery one, isn't she? Putting more energy into COOrdination then? Check.*

She went again, doing just that and getting a twenty seven. This time she connected, belatedly realizing she should have done a called shot, as usual. It didn't matter, in the end, as she hit the body for twenty six damage and the woman fell out of the sky without a sound. She didn't even thump as she impacted the dirt below, and Susan hastily called to Sparkle. "Get higher up!"

"Right!"

Susan waited a few segments, somewhat ironically holding her breath, then cast *Transposition* again, switching the two.

She shaded her eyes, expecting an explosion. What she got was the poor woman's body going **splat** on the ground, again making no noise.

"Oh," said Susan, "I guess that's just when they die?"

"Don't look at me. What are we going to do with her now?"

Susan thought a moment. "Actually... I have an idea."

Blending In

Place: Just inside the gate

Time: Just then

“We have to move fast. You still have energy, right?” asked Susan.

“Yeah, some. What do you have in mind?”

“You’ll see. Come on.” Susan dragged the unconscious woman with her using *Telekinesis* as she backed out of the area. She had to get out of the kingdom so her *Teleportal* magic would work again, which she did.

“I’ll be right back,” she said to Kelder and Sativola. “Stay out of sight but keep close, I think I can get us all inside when I get back!”

She opened a hole in the air, and stepped through. “Can I get a little help here?” she called, after dropping the transport spell. She dumped the body on the table and stuck her head into the hallway, where she told the young boy that was walking through with a book she needed to see Ithinia the Wizard, and that he would bring her here, no arguments!

The boy, conditioned to obey, hurried off to see what he could do, and moments later she appeared through the door.

“Who is that?” she asked, taking in the scene.

“A Shatra, I think,” Susan replied.

“And you brought her here?” shrieked Ithinia, grabbing her knife out of its sheath.

“Wait, her? There’s no such thing as a... Who is this?” She lowered the knife, walking forward and looking the woman over.

“Well, she could float around, silence with a touch, and when she was holding onto me I couldn’t breathe or get free. You know anything but one of your half-demon friends that can do all that?”

“But that’s not a Shatra! A Shatra is a combat demon, a man!”

“Really?” asked Susan icily. “A woman can’t be a fighter?”

She sputtered. “Maybe it’s different where you come from-”

Susan waved that away. “Never mind that. Do you have any sort of holding cells for dangerous people? We need to stick her in one.”

“What in the name of all the gods for?”

“A bunch of reasons, actually. First, I’m not just going to kill her in cold blood, I learned a non-lethal spell to not seriously hurt anyone there. Second, I’m taking her place, so she’ll need to be gone from the area. Third, I thought perhaps you might like to, I don’t know, see if the demon inside her can be removed and she can go back to being just a person again?”

The wizard shook her head. “As far as I know the process is irreversible.”

“But you’ve not really studied it?”

“That’s true. I suppose we should make some attempt. And you say you’re going to replace her?”

“Yup. You want to hide in the ocean, you have to look like a fish!”

“I suppose. Come along then.”

Susan hefted her with magic (just touching her, she had discovered, caused her to be unable to breathe) and followed. She floated her into the waiting cell, and gently lowered her to the ground. “Actually, she took a pretty nasty fall so she may need medical treatment. I didn’t want to do any healing on her, because that would wake her up. Now, let’s see here...” She did a *Magic Sense*, getting a sixteen, enough to sense the magic in the choker and two bracelets. She took them off, carrying them with her out of the cell.

“You want to heal her now?” asked Ithinia. “I’d feel more comfortable with you around, if she gets out of hand. Plus, don’t you want to ask her some questions about the place?”

Susan shook her head. “No time. Don’t want to be gone too long, the soldiers will start waking up. Plus, she didn’t make a single sound the whole time I was fighting her. I don’t think we’ll get much out of her. No, use whatever healing magic you have, and have a bunch of wizards with materials ready in case she tries to escape. I *think* these bracelets had something to do with her STRENGTH before, it felt like my own STRENGTH was being reflected

back at me. Without them, she shouldn't be nearly as strong." *I hope.*

"Sorcery," said Ithinia with a grimace. "Who can say what sort of power they have? We'll get an expert in right away to take a look at them."

"Great. I'll be back as soon as I can, but I doubt she'll give you much trouble. I'm heading back, see you later."

One casting later, and Susan was again at the border of the kingdom of Reldamon.

"There's some commotion over there," said Sativola. "Whatever you're doing, you better do it quick."

"Don't worry." Susan put *Invisibility* on herself, then dragged two soldiers out when no one was looking. She brought them back to the other's hiding spot, then drained their energy. "That's better," she sighed. "Now, you two, strip!" She started taking her clothes off as well.

"You like to get people's clothes off, don't you?" Sativola asked suspiciously.

Kelder was tightly closing his eyes.

"You better believe it. Now, if you want to come with me, you'll do as I say. You two are going to be *Shape-shifted* into these two guards. You'll put on their clothes, and we'll march back in there. This way, no one should attack us anymore and we can get to the castle."

"Oh," said Sativola. "But, they're guys."

"So? Never been a guy before? It'll be a good experience for you. Now hurry up, we've been gone too long already!"

"Who are you going to be?"

"I'm going to be the Shatra, of course. Come on, come on!"

Reluctantly, the two stripped down and figured out how to take the armor off the two unconscious soldiers. While they did that, Susan reloaded the *Spell Symbols* she had used, making sure the most useful spells for what she figured she would be facing next were loaded into her bracelet. That done, she had Sparkle cast *Shape-Shift* on all of them, while they all held the image of what they wanted to turn into in their minds. Quickly donning the armor, Kelder and Sativola were now the spitting image of the two soldiers they had looted.

"Wait a minute, how come you get those rags but we had to put on these clothes?" protested Kelder, looking her over. "Couldn't we have just looked like them in armor?"

"I'm still technically naked," she explained. "I'm just in the shape of that woman, in rags. I figured you two would not want to walk about the kingdom naked, even if it looked like you were wearing something. And besides, the armor could come in handy. I'm not exactly happy with it myself."

Liar.

"But no one should look twice at a Shatra, if they know what's good for them. Right?"

"Can we just get this over with?" asked Sativola.

"Okay." Susan shoved the whole ball of clothes into her *Pocket Dimension*, then took to the sky with *Flight*.

"I'll be nearby," said Sparkle, "just act natural, okay?"

"I don't know what's natural for a soldier in this kingdom!"

"Just look like you belong. And don't talk to me, I won't be able to make any nosies if I'm to stay in character. Ready? Come on."

The three went back through the gate, where fresh soldiers were trying to wake up the ones that had been taken out just moments ago by Susan. The two tried to walk with purpose, like they were looking for something, and gripped their weapons tightly. Susan floated along and tried to look uninterested.

The "kingdom" was the most run down place she had yet seen in this world, with hardly any green to be seen. There were a lot of run down looking places, people, and things, and no one gave her a second glance. *Meaning she's been floating around here long enough to not be a curiosity any more. That, or they know not to make trouble when there are "soldiers" around.* She saw many people that she assumed were living on the streets, they were dirty and basically wearing rags. *This kingdom hasn't done them any favors, and if the king is a demon, it's not hard to guess why.*

She led them around in circles for some time, given her *No Sense of Direction* weakness, but finally the castle came into view. She paused, found a place behind some houses that seemed deserted, and made her way over there. The others followed.

"I'm heading for the castle, and they'll probably let me in," she explained. "I'll see how far I can get before I get stopped, and see if I can't find out what's in the dungeon or wherever the king goes. I can make you *Unseen* again, or you can stay here."

"What did we come this far for if not to go inside?" asked... whoever that was. Susan had lost track.

"I'm just making you the offer," she explained. "The Shatra can see you, and if he starts asking why you're there and others start saying he's talking to thin air..."

"That could cause an issue," the other agreed. "You can save right here, right?"

"Oh yeah, good point, we've made it this far, it's a great time to!" Susan did so. "So you're in?"

The two looked at each other and nodded. "We're in," they said.

"Just make sure not to bump into anyone," said Sparkle, coming up behind them. "It'll be hallways inside, not big open spaces like this. Don't forget and crash into somebody."

They both nodded, and Susan got out her book, putting *Unseen* on all three. That done she put it away again and floated into the castle.

Why didn't you just go in Unseen? asked The Darkness.

I want to see how people in the castle react to me. Plus I may have to open guarded doors, and that would break the spell. Well, if they were standing right in front of it, anyway.

Upon entering the castle Susan received a great deal of deference, with soldiers, noblemen, girls that were probably princess, pretty much everyone stepping to the side when they saw her floating past. Conversations stopped, and began again much lower after she passed. *So they know what I- what she is. And apparently she's seen around the castle enough to not cause any undo comment.*

Susan went down any set of stairs she come to, but worried that she would walk right past any door to the basement. *After all, you wouldn't guard this side of the door, would you? No, you would just lock this side, so as not to advertise to anyone walking past that there was something to be guarded just beyond.*

She need not have worried, as one of the "guards" whispered "here!" to her, looking at a door like any other. She slowly turned, but no one was in this particular hallway.

"There's a strong magic on this door!"

Must be nice to sense magic like I currently do Spirit Energy. I have to make checks in Magic Sense, it seems she just kind of picks up on stuff.

Susan tried the handle, but it was locked, so glancing to make sure she was still "alone" she cast *Unlock* and pushed it open. There was a set of stairs heading down, and torchlight beyond, so Susan didn't bother with *Light* or *Darksight*. She slowly floated down, and the others followed, softly closing the door.

Wish I knew the Lock spell now, but hopefully no one will try the door anytime soon. I don't have a LUCK of nine for nothing, after all.

The group went down.

They found a simple hallway, lit by torches, and Susan heard voices up ahead. Looking down the hall there were several doors, only one of which had soldiers in front of it. The others were unguarded, so she went forward and started opening them. The two soldiers perked up at this, but apart from looking at each other confused, didn't move.

The door on the left was abuzz with activity, it looked like people doing *Imbuing*, or at least this world's version of it. Crystals, diagrams, charts, workbenches, all manner of things were being studied, looked at, worked on, or created by men in dark clothes.

"Talismans," said one of her friends, looking past her.

"Quiet, they can probably see and hear you," whispered Susan. "They have magic!"

She nodded her head, and crept past.

The next room was just storage, and the room past that was a barracks looking place, plain with rows of beds. That just left the room at the end, and as Susan approached she could hear screams coming from within. *Yeah, this must be the place.*

The guards, still uncertain, blocked her path with their weapons.

“No one is allowed in... how did you get down here, anyway?” asked the one on the right.

Susan pointed to the door, knowing if she spoke it was probably all over.

“She got down here, the king must have let her, right?” the one on the left asked the one on the right.

“But what about our orders? He would have sent written orders down with her, right?”

“You want to try stopping her if she wants to go through this door? We’re expendable!”

man. “I guess. Heh, it’s not like she’s going to go tell the king on us anyway!” snorted the man. “Are you?”

She stared at him, wondering how much her original interacted. She had a brilliant idea, and put a finger to her lips like she saw the original doing.

“Yeah, yeah. Go through then.” The two stepped out of the way, and Susan tried the knob.

It was locked as well.

She looked between the men, who shrugged. “We can’t open the door, you crazy?” asked the one on the left. “You hear all that screaming, don’t you? I don’t *want* to know what’s on the other side.”

She looked to the other, who raised a palm, no help there.

Susan touched the door and silently cast *Unlock* again, making the door glow with magic.

“Hey now, what are you doing?” asked the right guy, starting to bring his weapon up again.

Susan grabbed the knob again, easily twisting it and shoving the door open. The screaming noises got louder.

“Oh, uh, okay?” He seemed torn between wanting to see what was in the room and knowing he would probably be killed if he actually did, so he faced directly away from it again. “Didn’t know you could do that.”

Susan ignored him, shoving the door fully open so her friends could step inside.

What she saw horrified her beyond anything she had ever witnessed.

People, all kinds of people, strapped down and thrashing. Young people. Old people. Men. Women. Some looked to be totally maniac, at the sight of the door opening they went wild, straining against their bonds. Others didn’t even notice, just kept screaming in agony. All were filthy, and the smell was beyond foul. Any clothes they had been wearing were torn off long ago, and some were deformed, as if demons had been implanted into them and started to physically change their bodies. But the changes weren’t complete, and those changed had no sanity left in their eyes, if eyes they had. One had scales over one half his body, another woman had four extra arms and her head looked like a spider’s. Those not in agony were looking at her like they wanted nothing more than to tear her apart, and were straining against chains, ropes, and other bonds to do so. At least one person had hope in their eyes, seeming to shout “kill me, please kill me!” above the din.

In one corner of the room there was a cleared section, where a symbol was painted on the floor. Black candles, burnt almost to stubs, encircled the symbol, and parts were covered with what could only be dried blood. Knives, gems, crystals, and even more odds and ends overflowed from a shelf nearby, possibly components for whatever demon needed to be summoned for the sick experiments carried out here.

Susan’s anger at the scene flared white hot in an instant.

The rejects, unless I miss my guess, remarked The Darkness. *And listen to that choir!*

You even hear anything like that? Astonishing what you tiny beings can accomplish if you try, isn't it? It's like a human scientist trying to make a winged pig by splicing together-

Shut. Up.

Just making convers-

QUIET!

Okay, okay.

Susan turned, looking back at her friends. One "guard" had his hands at his temples, as if trying to block out psychic pain on a scale he had never experienced. The other just looked sick. Even through her anger, Susan had to sympathize. She couldn't begin to imagine the psychic pressure her witch friend was under right now. But she knew she still had a job to do.

"Get back," she said to them, shoving them towards the door. "Sparkle, shut them up."
"Right," said Sparkle, starting to cast.

"You can talk?" asked the guard on the right, having heard her. Susan's anger flared again, and she used maximum energy to cast *Elemental Weapon* twice, once for each hand. The surprised guards didn't stand a chance as she spent an XP for an extra action and stabbed both of them in the chest at the same time. She still had *Augment Skill* going, and easily pierced both, doing forty four and sixty two damage, dropping them both. She let go of the blades again, and they slumped over.

"Uh..." said one of her friends.

"Not now," she replied tightly.

The screaming cut off, and the two looked over to see the room blanketed in fog. Susan knew what was happening, she just bent down and started casting *Energy Drain* on the two soldiers. She held it probably a little longer than was probably healthy on each, but at the moment she hardly cared.

That done, the fog cleared and the room was still.

"You two," she said, looking at her friends, "stay here. See what you can learn from them, I suggest you don't wake them up, though. If you think they can be saved, fine. I do know magic to expel one being possessing another. If you think it's not a form of possession, or they are too far gone, I'll put them out of their misery later. Unless you think you're up to it."

"You'll kill them?"

Susan gazed at him, eyes hard. "Would you want to exist like that? Or let them out into the world? Or try to care for them? Huh?"

"No, but... there must be another way!"

"Then figure it out. That's your job at the moment. Sparkle, same spell, that door." She pointed down the hall where the sorcerers were working. It was far enough away not to have heard the screams or the screams ending.

"Got it. I won't be of much use to you, I'm getting pretty low."

"Stay here with them. Safer that way. Just buff me. I'll have everything I'll need before I get up those stairs."

Sparkle looked to the energy drained soldiers now lying in a heap by the door.

"Don't go overboard. Remember Professor Umbrage."

"Even she wouldn't do something like this. The king here has."

"And killing him is the answer?"

"What, you want to put him on trail? He's making abominations! Look at them!"

Sparkle was silent a moment. "I saw. Okay, just don't lose yourself up there."

"I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so."

Sparkle went to put the sorcerers down the hall to sleep, and Susan stole their energy as well, draining them dry so they didn't wake up any time soon and provide magical support with whatever talismans they had working on down here. Susan wished she could identify, maybe use some against the king, but figured it was better to stick to her own magic anyway. There were six of them, and so Susan now had three hundred energy*, and Sparkle winced

when she got near.

“Feels weird,” she remarked, putting *Acceleration* on Susan.

“Feels good,” countered Susan. “Bet this is how experienced warlocks around here feel.”

“Just remember what happens to them.”

“Ha! I could take it. See you in a few minutes.”

“Good luck.”

“I’ve got all the luck I need, right here. *Blade.*”

*as a note, using the rule that only one stat can be a ten, the maximum energy a normal human can have in the Demongate High setting with the *Spirit Well* background is 360.

Fight in the castle

Time: A moment later

Place: The top of the stairs, leading into the castle proper.

As Susan mounted the stairs her anger grew again. *How can the king have sanctioned such a thing? Does he really think he can control these shatra? Or is he the victim, somehow? Did a shatra walk into his kingdom, demand access to resources... and then go on guard duty? But there could be more going on here. I need to learn the truth about what's going on here, and to do that I need the boss to come out.*

And I can think of no better way of doing that than doing what I do best. Mayhem extrodinare.

She reached the door and smashed it down with the sword in her left hand, again holding both so she could attack both with lethal force and with non-lethal when the situation called for it. She did thirty three damage to the door, plus another seventeen fire damage, and smashed it to pieces without issue. A maid down the hall screamed and dropped her load of sheets she had been carrying as the hulking form of Susan, gleaming armor and swords ablaze, shouldered her way past the tattered remains of the door and stared at her.

"Where's the king?" she demanded.

The maid took off running and screaming down the hallway.

How rude! exclaimed The Darkness.

I know, I asked so nicely too. Well, if she ran that way, the king must be this way.

Susan moved through the castle, allowing arrows to bounce her off and sticking her sword into people that got too close. She wasn't too sure, but given the fact they didn't burn to a crisp despite both her swords technically being on fire, she believed the fire was simply doing extra non-lethal damage to anyone she hit with it.

After all, magic, at least my kind, does seem to have a mind of its own. I mean it's quick enough to go away after the "scene" is over, how could it know that without having some connection to me? It can see I'm using a weapon designed not to kill anyone, so it modifies the effect a little. Nice of it, really.

The castle wasn't that large, but of course all the corridors confused her, as she no longer had even Sparkle to guide her. But she knew not to go down hallways where unconscious soldiers slumped, so finally she came upon a large door guarded by ranks of soldiers.

"Ah, the throne room at last!" she sighed, relieved. "Step aside and you won't be hurt!"

"Defend the king!" cried someone in back, and at least one person in the front looked back with an "are you crazy?" look and no one moved.

Susan gripped her blades and prepared to rush them, but to her surprise the doors behind her opened. Towering over the helmets was the first shatra she had seen, Mr. Exploder.

Crap. I kill him in here, and I could kill the king by accident. Better keep Phase on standby, no Sparkle to switch with him now.

"You obviously won't be able to stop her," he said. "So move. We'll protect the king."

The soldiers seemed all too happy to follow those orders, and the shatra bowed her into the room. "Welcome. I see you found your way here. Took your time slaughtering people inside the castle though. Was it good for you?"

"They'll recover. Move." She pointed her *Crystal Blade* at him.

"Of course, right this way." He moved off to the side, and Susan cautiously stepped past him, into the room. It was the throne room, and the king sat upon his throne back against the far wall. Keeping an "eye" on the shatra at the door with *Spirit Sense*, so she would know if he moved, she strode over to him. Beside his chair was a man in a colorful, patchwork outfit, currently balancing on one hand. He had a very lean look to him, and he started doing

one handed pushups, straight up into the air. He didn't seem that strong, but he was probably just as tall as the shatra she had left behind, who was moving around to the other side of the chair. Susan's seventeen *perception* check also allowed her to notice the large sickle nearby, within grabbing distance of the "jester." The king seemed to be a middle aged man, dark hair and beard, golden crown, the whole works. There was something off about him, but Susan couldn't be sure of what it was. Maybe the eyes?

Oh yeah, the fact he has no health level above his head. Just sort of taking that for granted now, aren't I? The other two, twenty two and thirty four- what is that guy's DTR anyway? Never mind, I took his leg off once I can do it to his head. But for the king to not have health I can see? That's got to be bad news... for me.

"You've been causing quite a stir in my kingdom," he said as she approached. "You could have just made an appointment like any other supplicant. What do you want, anyway? We're a poor kingdom, as you can see. If you're looking to ransom me or my family, or raid our treasury-

"Who is in charge here?" Susan asked over him. "I take it that's you," she said to the shatra who was now standing by the king. His hand was on his sword, but he hadn't drawn it yet. He looked surprised, not sure why she was addressing him.

The king looked over at him. "Uh, hello? King? Right here?"

"Oh, so you're going to take responsibility for what I found in your basement?"

"What do you mean, what you found in my basement? You come here, attack my kingdom, and you want to know what's in my wine cellar?"

Wait, does he not- but the wizards said they saw him going there with scrying magic, right?

"I'm talking about where the shatra come from!" she said, getting annoyed. "You know, that guy there?" She pointed with her blade. "And all the tortured, screaming people in your basement that have been experimented on. Turned partly into demons... ringing any bells?"

"Who, my bodyguard? Nonsense! Shatra, indeed. They've been extinct hundreds of years. Why, I'd claim you were one before I accused anyone here, have you looked at yourself lately? And there are certainly no dungeons as you describe them in *this* castle."

"Fine. You want to do this the hard way, we'll take a little trip down there. You can see it for yourself."

"I'm not leaving this room, much less going anywhere with you."

"Oh really? I'm afraid I'm going to have to insist."

"Do you know what she's talking about?" he asked the man at his side.

"Personally she sounds a bit deranged. Do you want me to escort her out?"

"Escort her out? Kill her! You've heard the reports of what she's been doing in my kingdom!"

"I'll try, but you must feel the amount of inner energy she has. There's no way she's human, and those swords of hers-" He cut off, and both he and the king froze, eyes glued to Susan.

"You just slipped up," she said to the shatra. "Wait, why would the king be able to..." She made a *Spirit Sense* check, getting a twelve. That was enough to tell the king had quite a bit more energy than she did, while the shatra she had been impressed with before seemed mundane in comparison. "What are you?" she demanded of the king. "You aren't human either, with that level of energy."

"Are you just guessing, or do you know?" asked the king, leaning forward.

"I know my energy total is between yours and his. I'm not used to having this much, or I would have noticed it immediately when I came in. I stole most of this from your sorcerers, below."

"Are they dead?" he asked.

"No, I haven't killed anyone. And I would prefer not to, but once I saw those things you had done-

"Oh, honestly. Do you have no appreciation for science?"

"One plus one equals two!" said the jester, now juggling some balls.

"Exactly!" said the king, nodding. "That's all I'm doing here. Making something that's better than either being was before. How is that so wrong?"

“So wrong? You don’t find anything amiss in all those screaming people down there?”

“I admit, the procedure has only created a few successes. The old way of creating shatra worked well enough, I admit. But it was so boring! I mean they chose the simplest, least powerful demon to fuse with a man because even that was more than a match for regular soldiers at the time. But there are many types of demon, and I’m working to find a way to implant them all! I’m closer in some cases.”

“You can seriously just sit there and calmly tell me you’re experimenting with summoning *demons*, and then shoving them inside people and claiming it’s for *science*? You’re a monster! Wait, is that what you are? Is that why your *Spirit Energy* is greater than mine? You did something to yourself, didn’t you?”

“Me? No. I’m the way I’ve always been. I suppose you’re going to die anyway, I might as well show you.” The king stood up, and the jester started laughing and clapping his hands. “Give us a show, I don’t need to be the one that does for once. Make her bleed, my lord. Crack open that shell, show us the meat inside.”

Is it going to be two on one or three on one? The jester didn’t seem to have much energy, hopefully I can safely ignore him, even if he does know what’s going on.

“It’s been too long since I had a worthy prey,” the king admitted, taking his crown off and setting it behind him on the throne. “Let me introduce myself.” In the blink of an eye the king was gone, but in his place was a large fox, as big as she was, with nine tails swishing the air in anticipation. “I’m the demon Yspaddaden. You’ve invaded my kingdom. Prepare to die.”

With a cackle of laughter the jester grabbed up the sickle and the other guy drew his sword.

“Wait!” shouted Susan as the fox took a step forward.

“Oh, did I scare you?” asked the fox, now sounding female and sexy. “Don’t worry, it’ll be over in a flash.”

“Actually, I just wanted to show you something,” she replied. “You mentioned my sword before, I thought I might get rid of one of them.” She held it out to the side and let it go, and the blade shimmered and disappeared.

“Are you mocking us?” the fox hissed, clearly displeased with the notion.

“Not at all. That sword would only knock you out, like I did to your soldiers outside. I want to see you *bleed*. *Pocket Dimension, Enhance Sword.*”

Susan put max energy into the spell and pulled out her second blade, which grew to match the first and lit on fire.

“Fire doesn’t scare us,” the fox scoffed.

“It scares me a little,” admitted the jester.

“Attack!” The fox and the big guy rushed forward, far faster than any human would have, and were upon her almost before she could blink, even *Accelerated* as she was. The jester, surprisingly, vanished, and Susan wondered if he had teleported or what? But they were in her world now, and *initiative order* was *initiative order*. She changed her stance to meet them.

So it’s going to be three on one after all. Super. Oh well, at least it’s easy to keep them from attacking all at once.

“*Dazzle!*” she cast, targeting both that she could see, and getting a twenty six total, accounting for the one segment penalty, two penalty for casting it twice, and thirteen energy thrown in. Both threw off the sudden dazzling light with sheer will, and kept coming.

Oh right, forgot that any spell that allows my opponents to will the magic away... will will the magic away. Will will? Good thing thinking about stuff is a free action. Maybe I should have mimicked that jester going invisible after all, or whatever he did.

The fox didn’t move from the front of the throne, just raised two tails and shot fire across the intervening space. Susan didn’t bother dodging, and they washed over her without causing any damage.

“Oh,” it said, “I’m going to have to get creative to get you out of that armor, is that it? Wonderful! It’s been too long since I was really challenged.”

Susan responded by shooting a weak *Elemental Bolt: Fire* back, and as expected, the

fox also didn't dodge.

"Stalemate!" said the fox, somehow managing to grin. "You're a quick one though, aren't you?"

She was about to make a pithy comment back when she suddenly found the jester in her face, swinging his sickle at her, forcing her to parry it. The jester knew his stuff, and slipped in under the blade, heading for her chest. It clanged off her armor, and she took a swing with her off hand hoping to catch the man by surprise. She was the one that was surprised, the man disappeared when her blade was an inch from hitting him, reappearing several meters away to her left. With him that close, she realized he had just used a technique she had yet to learn- *Spirit Step*. Or at least some kind of local equivalent.

He used his spirit energy to propel himself away from me. But he didn't do that to reach me, I would have felt it. So he covered that distance from the throne to here as a free action? He's freaking fast!

The soldier lowered his blade and gave a mighty bellow, charging at Susan much faster than a normal man could have. In fact he reached her just as it was her action, and she had to knock his sword away to avoid being skewered. She didn't want to dodge, as she wanted to try the same thing, attacking reactively. She underestimated the man's strength though, and had to make a STREngth check instead to not go flying backwards with the impact. She had put energy into COOrdination to fend off the blow, so she couldn't put any into STREngth and was shoved back, stumbling. She managed to remain standing though.

"You're strong, girl!" said the soldier, impressed.

So are you, apparently. Does that mean stuff like Immobilize won't work? Wait, here's something he might not expect. "Lubricate," she cast, targeting the blade in his hand.

"Huh?"

The blade squirted out of his hand.

"Ha ha! Just another man that can't handle his blade."

"I'll kill you!"

"Not by impalement!"

The jester took off running around, blurring past her and coming up low from the side, but instead of dodging, she reactively cast *Lubricate* again, because why change a winning strategy? Because casting it on a creature allows them a RESolve check, of course, which he beat by two and shrugged the spell off as he swung his blade. She had to make an off hand action to parry, and Susan couldn't even roll as high as he did. However, her armor saved her yet again, and the jester went "tisk" and jumped back a step.

"Thought you were getting her out of that?!" he yelled back to the fox.

"I'm not as fast as you two, give me a minute here!" The fox suddenly became a huge scorpion, front pincers clicking, though it still had nine tails.

That's a plus two size scorpion! Susan had to admit, she was a little impressed. Not intimidated, exactly, but a little impressed. (She was immune to fear effects due to the *Avatar* spell going, after all) *Do I pull out my Legion? I hate to make them do the fighting for me, I'm not learning anything that way. Well, it seems despite how fast these guys are, they still haven't pierced my armor. I'll give it a few more segments to decide. In fact, let's do the smart thing here...*

She had dropped *Lubricate* immediately after the sword flew out of the soldier's hands, and now she targeted it, rather than him. "*Thrust!*" It couldn't make resistance checks, so she didn't bother throwing extra energy in, just relied on her bonus from *Acceleration*. It sailed away, scraping and bumping along the floor until it impacted the wall several meters away.

"Hey!" The soldier looked torn between just trying to punch Susan through her armor or run after his sword. This would have been quite undignified, so he wasn't really prepared to do so.

The jester shook his head, then vanished, reappearing near the blade.

"Oh, thanks!"

"Who said I was getting it for you?"

"You won't use it, why did you go over there, then?"

"You really have no sense of humor, do you?"

"Humor this," said Susan, swinging at him. He tried to dodge, but even with the called

shot penalty, she beat his result and cut a deep fissure across his body. Amazingly, even doing thirty four damage he stayed up.

Needed to do one more, she thought, glancing at the numbers above his head. One! Must be the fire did nothing to him.

Looking at him, the cut wasn't bleeding, and in fact as she pulled the blade away his insides looked more like rock than guts.

"I'll get you for that," he said, taking a step back.

The jester appeared behind him, touched his back, and somehow was away again in what seemed like a single action.

Can these things spend XP for extra actions?

The two wound up behind the enormous bug barreling down on Susan, but Susan wasn't having any of that. She cast *Transposition* reactively, targeting the soldier and throwing in as much energy as she could. With that, the bonus from *Acceleration*, and the wound penalty the guy was now under he had no chance to survive, and Susan switched places with him as the claw came down to crush the life out of her.

She now had the jester touching her back, and was satisfied to hear the two claws crunching into the soldier.

"Wha?" the jester jerked his hand back, dropping the blade.

"I don't know how you did that, girl," said the fox/scorpion/king. "But you'll pay for it. You know how much effort a shatra takes to create?"

"Don't know, don't care." She swung at the jester, knowing he was much faster than then the scorpion. He dodged, twisting his lean and long body away from her blade at the last instant again, then vanished again. Susan was now at 216 energy.

Oh, I get it. If he gets killed by the demon, you don't have to feel guilty about killing him yourself. You're a piece of work, you know that?

Haven't I told you to be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate here!

You're doing fine.

Susan spun, noticing the jester was beside the scorpion now, who jumped and spun in the air, coming down to face her again.

"She can keep up with me," complained the jester.

"Maybe this will slow her down," the scorpion replied, hefting the body of the soldier.

"Speed up," intoned Susan, activating her *Speed Plus Materia*. She hadn't figured on needing it, and hadn't activated it on the way up here. *But if the jester can just blink around the room, I'm going to need the boost.* Her speed was now a twenty four, so she figured she could probably close the distance between them on her next action in two segments or so.

But as the scorpion brought the claw up with the soldier's body still in it, she knew what he was going to do.

And I guess you're right, she sent to The Darkness. Rather than moving, she made a quick *Spirit Manipulation* check, increasing her next expenditure of energy by fourteen rather than four.

"Uh, you want to throw that, boss?" the jester asked, edging away from the now glowing and flashing body of the soldier.

"I know what I'm doing!" Her claw reached back to throw.

Susan cast *Hypnotic Field* as strongly as she could, and their ten and fourteen results were far from the twenty nine she rolled because of it. The soldier exploded a segment later and the jester, the floor, part of the wall, and the floor under the scorpion were vaporized. This of course caused the scorpion to fall, knocking it out of the *Field*, but her opponents had dropped to one.

"You've ruined everything!" shouted the king from below. "I don't care if I destroy this whole castle, I'm taking you out!" Screams of panic rose from below, and there was a curious buzzing sound coming from down there too.

Don't know if I like the sound of that.

Susan held her action, having no sort of “trap” spells or any way to cover the hole. Not that she would, that would just have increased the king’s circle of destruction as it tried to get back here. What she saw crawl from the hole was even bigger than it had been, but still vaguely scorpion like. This creature, however, had wings. Once through the hole it took to the air, then almost drunkenly smashed headlong into one of the pillars, which it started smashing to pieces. It took only two blows against it to smash through, and stone and mortar rained down below. The king felt around with one huge claw, and satisfied it was in two pieces buzzed off in the direction of the next one.

Why is it acting like it’s- oh.

As Susan looked, she saw the creature’s eyes were closed. (It had gotten a twenty three on a REASON check to figure out the lights of the previous spell Susan had cast were what made them both freeze. So it was taking no chances now.)

I can’t use Slash-All, even with my STRength it’ll divide by three, then by... four? But I have to think of something! Even Burst will hardly slow it down, is that all I’ve got? Wait, I know.

“Flight,” she said, activating the corresponding charm on her bracelet. She then started casting *Teleportal*, taking the full two seconds, as even throwing energy into it taking a ten penalty wasn’t something she had in mind to do.

As she cast, the bug smashed into the second pillar, and it started swinging away. Two blows were not enough, and the bug brought her claw back for a third strike. This cracked the pillar down the center, and the king again went into the air to find the third.

“What’s the matter?” it called down to her. “Where’s all that speed you had before? Can’t fly, can you?”

Actually, I can, we’re just moving the battlefield.

As the bug darted for the next pillar, Susan let her *Teleportal* go, and put the one end directly in front of the unseeing bug. It zipped through, and Susan took off after it, flying herself. The second she was through she let it go, and the two combatants were now high above the ocean, thousands of leagues away from the small kingdom they had left.

How did you know the king exempted his castle from the barrier against that kind of thing? The Darkness asked.

What? Oh, uh, because he was bringing demons in. Couldn’t do that without dimension stuff working, right?

You totally forgot, didn’t you? Honestly, you should be glad that worked, you did try that spell to get into the kingdom, remember?

I can’t keep track of everything here!

Uh huh. Nice job.

“What just happened?” demanded the king, spinning to face her. “You disappeared for a second, but there you are again.”

“Open your eyes and find out.”

“Oh no, I don’t need my eyes to take you out. I should have hit the next pillar by now, too. Fine, I’ll just attack you directly then.”

But Susan acted first, flying under the king and trying to strike at the body. The king tried to dodge, but Susan’s sword cut in as she put all the energy she could into her STRength.

After all, it can’t see to dodge, right? Why put it into COOrdination?

The two were evenly matched in speed, but the king figured if Susan was attacking, she wasn’t casting spells, and risked a glance at her as she came up again. She caught the blade in one of her claws, twisting down and grabbing it as Susan struck.

“Opened your eyes, huh?”

“Yes. How did we get here?”

“Magic. Now let go of my sword!”

“No!”

Susan made a STRength check to tear it free, beat the king by six, and flew back out of her reach. But Susan was now of the defensive, as that was an action for her but not the king.

A claw, the size of her whole body, shot straight for her and Susan didn't dare parry it, she shot straight up, trying to get out of reach. The claw closed on empty air, and Susan brought her sword down on it even as the king came at her again.

Susan won that one, the sword slicing across the king's claw for nine damage.

"Argh! What's it going to take to kill you!?"

More than you've got.

Susan still had the initiative thanks to her being just slightly faster, so she fainted towards the king's midsection again. But even as the king tried to block, she didn't strike, instead casting "*Hypnotic Field*" again. It was twenty six to twenty one and the king went slack again, unable to complete the block... for the attack that never came.

Susan got ready to cast *Telekinesis* in case the king started falling, but luckily the figure hung in the air unable to even stop its wings.

Finally. I suppose people caught in it don't fall over, they still keep their balance and hold onto things. It makes sense the king keeps beating his wings.

She hovered in the king's face and said "Now, let's have a little chat."

Putting things where they belong

Time: Just then

Place: Somewhere out above the ocean

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Susan said to the entranced demon, still hovering where we left them last chapter, somewhere over the ocean. “I’m going to steal all that nice energy of yours, enough to knock you unconscious. Then I’ll shrink you down and bring you to the wizard’s guild where they can decide what to do with you. Won’t that be fun? Of course it will. *Energy Drain.*”

So Susan gathered the energy she had left, all four hundred and fifteen of it, giving her with a total of five hundred and eighty six. Of course, she went past her “zero” point, until she was knocked out and then went a bit further so she wouldn’t wake up any time soon. Once knocked out, the enormous bug was suddenly a nine tailed fox again, and Susan had to grab her before she fell.

Guess that’s your normal form?

That done, she did a *Shrink* and got her down to a more manageable size, then went back to the wizard’s guild building.

“Oh, what a cute little baby fox!” said the first wizard she met. “Where did you ever find such a thing!”

“It’s a demon,” said Susan crossly. “If it was awake it would rip your face off without hesitation. Go find me someone in charge so I can figure out what to do with it.”

“That’s a...” He noticed the nine tails hanging limply from behind the fox. “I’ll go right away.”

And so a demonologist was summoned, and the demon was placed into a pentagram the man inscribed on the floor, which he said would hold it. He also said it would keep her honest, while not forcing her to tell the truth, if she answered it would be a true answer.

“Can you wake it up?” Ithinia asked.

“Wake it up? No, I’ve never seen a demon sleep before, how would I do that?”

“I can do it, just a second,” said Susan, reading over and casting *Awaken*. The demon’s eyes popped open.

And she tried to spring to her feet, but was too exhausted and sore, and slumped down again.

“Going to gloat?” she asked wearily. “Look, wizard. You think I’m dangerous? But that girl beat me, so should I really be the one inside this circle?”

“Never mind that! We want to know what you were doing in that kingdom!” demanded Ithinia.

“Ask her,” said the fox, pointing with a tail tip. “She knows all my dirty little secrets.”

“Making shatra. I destroyed two, and the one I brought before makes three. There are about a dozen incomplete ones though, back in the kingdom that we’ll have to deal with.”

“A dozen? Things were worse there than we thought. Was that all you made? Three complete ones?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. But how did you remain undetected for so long?”

The fox looked at Susan.

“Never mind that, how do we fix those poor souls in your dungeon? Get the demon out of them?”

“Fix them? Their souls are one now. Unless you can climb inside their soul and drive the demon out, good luck.”

I can do that, I did it with Harry and Tom. But is there a ghost around here that I can trust to put me inside and then take me back out again?

“Fine, we’ll do that then. As to your question, these foxes can change their shape. I assume you killed the real king some time ago and took his place?”

“That’s right. He was quite... delicious.”

"Did you have any kids?" the demonologist asked, fearful.

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"We can deal with that later," said Ithinia. "For now we need to get there and bring order to that kingdom. I assume you didn't do things quietly?"

"He turned into a huge bug thing!" insisted Susan. "And there were two other shatra I had to take care of at the same time. You try it and see how quiet your battle is."

The demonologist's eyes were bugging out of his head, and his jaw was hanging loose as he heard Susan say this.

"She," said the demon.

"What?"

"I'm female. Don't let what I turn into fool you. Most of my kind are female, oddly."

"Fascinating," said Ithinia, not sounding interested in the least. "Can you send it back?"

"Of cour-"

"Do I have to go back?" whined the demon. "Do you know what it's like, living there? I could help you, use my power don't just throw me away!"

"How are you here in the first place?" asked the demonologist.

"Oh, uh, I broke out of a summoning circle and made a run for it. Should have seen the look on the little runt's face when I did."

"Ah, an apprentice. Still, you admitted to killing the king."

"Like he was worth the title."

"Still, I think sending you back rather than just killing you outright is the best we can do."

"Why not just kill it?" asked Ithinia.

"My good woman!" said the Demonologist. "I have to work with these creatures you know. If it get around that I killed one that was helpless like this, why, I'd lose my livelihood at the best, my life at the worst. The other nine tails would find out somehow, believe me. Demons may not share information with us readily, but among themselves, you can count on it. Or a demon would kill me to get a favor from them, or refuse to work with me, or raise their prices-"

"I get the idea. Fine. Be done with it, we have work to do."

The demon banished back to the underworld, Susan took the wizard's guild to Reldamon, through a *Teleportal* into the castle's lower level.

"You're back!" her friends exclaimed, glad she was all right.

"Where did you get all that energy from?" Sparkle asked, wincing away from her. "You're buzzing like you drank an entire coffee crop."

"It's the demon's. I'll tell you the whole story of my twelve second combat later. For now, we need to get these poor souls out of here, secured, and figure out how to get my soul into theirs so we can cure them."

"Wait, you were serious?" asked Ithinia.

"Of course. I don't make a habit of leaving a job half done. Or not helping those I can. You can't detach your soul and float it over to do battle with some kind of demon, right?"

"Uh, no. You're saying you can?"

"I've done it before. But I think I'll have to modify the spell... anyway, I can secure them, can anyone float them?" The wizards showed their empty hands... no ingredients. "I am really coming to hate so called wizards. Fine, I'll do *everything*. As *usual*."

Susan opened a *Teleportal* to where the shatra was, who was up and about and silently looking over the proceedings. They filled up the cells, and wizards were sent for ingredients so they could cast sleep spells themselves, and keep them all quiet for the night.

Susan stayed out of the guild explaining things to the royal family, about how the queen's husband had, for several years, been a female shape shifting fox demon. She fainted dead away at the news, but her youngest son just said "wicked" like it was the coolest thing he had ever heard.

She, meanwhile, was making *Spell Papers*, and replacing the *Spell Symbol* on her

sword and bracelet charms.

After all, why just let this energy ebb away from me? I'll put it to a much better use than that demon did! Imagine having this much energy all the time!

She even made a few new ones, from writings, like *Alternate Dimension* in case she started fighting in a place she didn't want wrecked up.

That night, Susan and the others stayed in the guild building, and Susan talked over the battle with Sparkle.

"I realized something in my combat with the demon," she said.

"Okay."

"Trying to do damage to something is the least efficient means of ending a battle. On the one hand I need to learn to fight without magic for when I rescue my father. And the non-lethal sword I have is totally great. But I need to learn one spell, resisted by different stats, that can instantly end a fight. If you look at what I have, *Shrink* is RES, *Immobilize* is STR, *Hypnotic Field* is REA. I need something resisted by CON. Is there something resisted by ENDurance?"

"Not that I recall. I think CON is about all you're going to get."

"We'll have to look. I need to cover all my bases, those things shrugged off my RESolve spells like *Dazzle*, even here where there are two moons!"

"Wow. I can see why you would be concerned about that."

"I know, right? Good news is, I got ten XP for all that running about in the kingdom, so I'm ready for the next adventure."

The next day, Susan was pleased to see her book of spells had modified, as she had asked, the spell of *Soul Sever* to be *Soul Projection*. A touch based spell, it could accomplish what it took Myrtle to do the last time just by casting it and touching someone. Their "inner soul" would be entered and explored as a sort of *Personal Dimension*. Susan tried it out on the first of the unconscious shatra rejects, and found with a little luck, the combined soul wasn't exactly hard to find. Basically because any soulscape that existed before had been destroyed by the botched fusing attempt. Most of what she found was withered trees, run down buildings, and two souls, totally out of it and only somewhat stuck together.

Basically Siamese twins, thought Susan, looking over the first pair. *But how do I separate them?*

The souls were too busy locked in combat with each other to notice Susan reading her book over, and she tried *Dismiss*, which seemed to work immediately.

Wait, how can I read my book in here?

It's part of you, isn't it? The Darkness answered. *It's on your character sheet, and that's basically who you are. Why wouldn't you be able to see the soul of the book just as you see the physical part of it out there?*

Oh.

Susan repeated this procedure several times, and each time the demon vanished as though it had never been. All of them complete she hit one with the *Alleviation* knife and woke it up. The person was very confused and seemed barely coherent, but Sativola pronounced her thoughts free from the taint of demons. She suggested they be woken, one at a time, and a witch assigned to each one to help them come to terms with what they had experienced. Susan said that was an excellent idea, as her spell could give back lost stats, but not help them cope with the reality of having a demon inside their souls for any length of time.

"And who is going to pay all these witches?" asked Ithinia.

"The guild," she answered simply. "After all, the *wizard's* guild is supposed to be keeping this very thing from happening, right? And let's be honest- three shatra and a full demon in one kingdom? With that wall and who knows what else set up there specifically to keep you wizards out? You wouldn't have managed it yourself, not without wizard casualties. Especially if that demon figured out how to reliably make shatra. By the time you learned

about it, it would have been too late. This can be part of your... penance.”

“Awfully smug for a mere witch,” she grumbled, but sent someone to open the treasury and go hire some witches.

Sativola just smiled like like a child that has just gotten their way.

“And now for you,” Susan said at last, as the only one left in the holding cells was the full shatra. “Somehow I don’t think we can separate you quite as easily as the others. For one thing, my body will suffocate if I touch you, and I doubt your inner landscape will be as pleasant.”

Oddly, the shatra hadn’t really tried to escape during all this, just sort of floated there, looking only mildly interested in the proceedings.

“If only I could talk- Sativola, can you read her mind?”

She shook her head. “She thinks in demon language. I tried but there’s no way I’m doing it again. Sorry.”

“Ah well. Can you write?” The demon shook her head. “Ah, but you can answer! That’s a start. If I were to let you out of here, would you just attack me again?” Shake of the head. “Would you attack anyone?” The demon nodded, sadly. “Why? Oh, wait, you can’t exactly answer that. Uh, this is frustrating. Would you attack someone in particular?” Shake. “But you would attack someone, for some reason?” Nod. “You didn’t like me shouting at you earlier, did you?” Shake. “Would you attack anyone who shouted at you?” Nod. “Ah, now we’re getting somewhere. Is there something you might like to do, if we let you go free?” Shake. “Really? Then why did you hang around that kingdom? Did the demon promise you something?” Shake. “Did it threaten you?” Shake. “Did it have something you needed?” Shake. “Did you want to be there?” Blank look. “You didn’t care one way or the other?” Nod. “Huh. Okay. What am I missing here? Can you get that demonologist back? Maybe he can figure out what kind of demon she was fused with and tell me what it wants.”

“Oh, that seems like a silence demon,” said the Demonologist, looking the woman over.

“A silence demon? I guess if I fought fire demons and speed demons, why not? So what does it want?”

“Who knows! They’re useful because they don’t try to rip your face off if you summon one, but they usually take the form of a piece of cloth. So they aren’t good for much, so we don’t typically summon them.”

“What would you do if you *did* summon one?”

“Uh, give it an order, I guess? They do what they’re told. One of the only demons *to* do as they’re told, actually. Probably because they can’t talk back, but maybe just for something to do. I mean what does a demon in the shape of a bed sheet do with its time?”

Susan had to admit, that was a good question. “That’s what I’m missing,” said Susan, snapping her fingers. “You were *ordered* to stay there, weren’t you.” Nod. “So if someone ordered you to do something, you would do it?” Nod. “Right, that’s why you didn’t care about where you were. Okay,” she turned back to the man. “In your professional opinion, what do we do with this poor woman? Is it safe to let her out?”

“Safe?” The Demonologist looked at the wizards around the room. “As long as no one shouts at her, she’s harmless. But she would kill someone in that case, it’s really the only warning we have when dealing with them. Stay calm and speak to them quietly.”

“Would you take her off our hands?” Ithinia asked.

“A servant that won’t talk back, and just wants to follow orders? I’m sure I could find a use for her. Having someone that can fly, and choke any unruly demon that happens to shout at me? Certainly!”

“If she kills someone, you’ll be held responsible!” she cautioned.

“I realize that.”

“Very well. Let’s open the door, everybody get back.”

“If you make trouble I’ll just put you back there,” Susan said to her as the door was unlocked. “You understand that, right?” Nod. “Okay. Go with this man, he’s your master now.” Nod.

The door opened, she floated over to him and waited for orders. “We’ll take our leave,”

said the Demonologist, and Ithinia waved him away.

“Seems your first task is complete,” she said to Susan. “Well done.”

Yeah, you failed to kill me, so you know you're stuck with me. HAHA.

“Thanks. I've got an idea for the second, I saw it paging through my book last night. I made a few copies of the spell, we can try it out.”

“But it has to be a *permanent* benefit to wizardry!” she reminded Susan.

“Don't worry, this is just to know if it works. Let's go visit those fellows doing spell research.”

On one of the upper floors, Susan was introduced to an old looking wizard with a variety of odd looking things in front of him.

“What spell I'm trying to create?” he asked, surprised. “You're really interested?”

“I sure am. What have you got for me?”

“Are you familiar with Galger's Singing Spell?”

“I can't say that I am. What's it do?”

“Basically, you enchant an object to sing a song. You tap it, and it turns on, and you tap it again and it turns off.”

“Okay?” Susan wasn't sure what the point was, but maybe to record a famous performance? They didn't have any other means, she supposed.

“I was wondering if the same thing could be done for images as for sounds. In other words, prepare an object and cast the wizardry into it. When it's done, the object can play back everything that happened around it. What do you think?”

I think you want to invent film, it would be way easier. “Sounds interesting. How far have you gotten?”

“Oh, I've been thinking about the problem for, oh, about a year now it has to be. I'm sure in another month or so I'll be ready for a trail or two.”

Susan stared at him. *He's been working on this one spell for a year? I didn't know how good I had it with my book. Four background points or not!*

“A month? But you could try it now, you have the ingredients you need here?”

“Well, yes,” hedged the wizard. “But it could be quite dangerous...”

She waved that away. “Not with me around. That's the whole point, using one of my already known spells to help you guys find previously unknown spells. Good deal, right? Now, this is a spell my book calls *Simulation*. Basically upon casting you explain to the spell what you want to accomplish and how you are going to accomplish it. The magic then shows you exactly what would happen should you attempt that action in real life. To avoid having to cast it now I've put in into this piece of paper, so if you have all the needed ingredients before you, I'll activate it and we can see if it'll work with your wizardry.”

The wizard blinked. “Can you say that again?”

Susan carefully explained what she wanted the wizard to do, and he got assurances from Ithinia that this was all legitimate. After learning no harm could possibly come to him, as the spell wouldn't actually be cast, he didn't have to even touch his knife, he said he was game. Susan cast, he spoke the procedure for the spell while standing in the area lit by her magical circle, and the circle went out when he was done describing what he wanted.

“Oh dear,” he said, rather concerned. “I died rather spectacularly, didn't I? I wonder what could have possibly gone wrong?”

What the Warlocks Have To Say

Place: Wizard Guild building

Time: Just after the first test of *Simulation*

“Do you have any more of them?” asked Ithinia, indicating Susan’s *Spell Paper*.

“Sure, I made a bunch last night when I had all that energy. Thought they might come in handy. Why?”

“Do you mind if I used one?”

“Not at all,” Susan replied, wondering what she had in mind. Ithinia pulled the other wizard off to the side and had a whispered conversation with him. He pulled some things from the nearby shelves and set them on the table in front of her. She activated the *Spell Paper* and started describing what she wanted to do. Evidently she was satisfied, as the spell dissipated and she nodded.

“We weren’t tricking you, you know,” said Sparkle disapprovingly.

“The thought didn’t even cross my mind. I have no idea what you even mean.”

“Sure.”

And so Susan got to work making the spell into an object for each branch of the guild, found in the major cities in Ethshar. She placed the spell into a mirror, which seemed appropriate, and of course the wizards had no shortage of expensive components she could use up to make each one. She made them energy based, as it was only four energy to activate, figuring that would be a good limitation on someone just trying it hundreds of times a day. (Also it took less time, of course.) This way they just physically couldn’t, and it would be more likely to be shared among research wizards rather than just hoarded by the people at the top. She also gave it a minor *Fabrication*, just so it would last longer and not be destroyed in case some clumsy fool dropped it. Given her ability to raise her *Imbuing* skill to superhuman levels, it didn’t take long at all to make all three, and in the end, Ithinia had to admit she had more than fulfilled her part of the bargain.

“I’ve been watching you carefully, making those things,” she said when Susan handed the last one over to be tested. “I feel like I could almost make one myself! It doesn’t seem as complex as our most complex spells, though the fact you grabbed stuff almost at random is worrisome.”

“Making your own is certainly possible,” allowed Susan. “But keep in mind I make it look easy because my magic is artificially increasing my skill at doing this. Nonetheless, I’ll leave you the formula for the spell, as well as some minor formula for spells common to both our types of magic. A friend of mine tried to work out how to translate wanded magic and mine, but as smart as she is, she was still in school. Someone with fifty or more years of working with magic might have a better chance at it. Plus, you’ll have the mirrors themselves to study, perhaps you can work out a method of making your own version.”

“I hope so. I think they could really make our lives better, because no longer would a wizard have to risk their life or sanity trying to make new spells.”

“I wish you luck. You can even use the mirrors to help you make more mirrors, because you can test out making one before you do it. But all that aside, you will now agree to help me save your world?”

She sighed. “Yes. I’m sorry for doubting you before, and making you go through all of this-”

Susan shrugged that off. “I’m used to it, and I helped that kingdom out a lot. I got directly rewarded in my own way, so don’t worry about it. What’s our next step?”

“Our *first* step,” she clarified, “is to go talk to someone on the warlock’s council. That’s found here, in Ethshar of the Spices.”

“I wondered why you wanted the mirror for this place made last. I assume it’s close by?”

“Quite. They should be waiting for us, so let’s head over there.”

Susan said her goodbyes to the wizards now excitedly exclaiming over the mirror, and

to Kelder who was now free to go back to his studies. Sativola of course was nearby, and fell into step with the group along with Sparkle.

The chairman's house was rather large, and well maintained, which Susan thought was only natural for a bunch of magic users that only had to think about something and have it happen. There was a thick iron fence around the place, which Susan had to believe was there just for ornamentation given no one in their right mind would attack a place a dozen or more warlocks were bound to be hanging out in. As she neared the place a man looked up from the front step where he had been sitting, and waved to them to wait a moment as they got up to the gate. He stood up oddly, and Susan had to go back over what he had done in his mind before she realized he had actually used his magic to push himself up and off the stairs rather than his legs.

Which I would think was rather dangerous, given this Calling I've heard about.

"I've been expecting you," said the man, and Susan felt him using warlocky on the gate to unlock it. "Please, come in. I'll take you to the chairman."

The group was ushered inside and offered refreshments while the chairman was summoned, and it wasn't more than a moment before he was descending the stairs.

"Ah, Ithinia, how nice to see you again," he said. He was dressed in black, and a gold trimmed cape trailed behind him. He was fairly young looking, probably about twice Susan's age, which Susan figured was probably about right.

Warlocks don't last long, after all.

"Hello, Gorsedd," Ithinia said, cordially enough. "This is Susan, the girl I was telling you about."

"Ah yes, the girl that uses warlocky without being a warlock. And who says she's come to save the world from us!" He laughed. "I've been looking forward to meeting you." He held out a hand, and Susan shook it. "So," he said, sitting down. "What gives you the impression warlocky is so dangerous? I mean obviously it is, we get called. But Ithinia was saying something about you thinking there was more to it than that?"

"That's right. The voice I seem to hear that allows me to use the warlock power is the same voice I hear when a being I call The Darkness talks to me." She explained the bare minimum about what exactly that was.

"I see, I see. Forgive me, but would you mind demonstrating your use of warlocky? It's in poor taste I know, but one can never be too careful."

So I've observed. "Not at all." Susan exerted her will on a small end table, gained an energy, and it rose into the air.

"Ah, that is indeed our magic!" Gorsedd exclaimed. "Now, one further test, won't take a second. I'm just going to peek inside your head for a moment, if that's okay with you?"

"Whatever you feel is needed."

"Very good. And let's see now..." He appeared to be looking through Susan, and she knew what he was doing. Using that odd "sense" she could access through that weird whisper in her head. "Nope, I don't see the brain structure that would allow you to access warlock magic. How extraordinary."

"So you believe me then?"

He hesitated. "I believe there's something odd about you..."

Sparkle looked over with as much of a "you wouldn't believe me if I told you" expression as a cat can muster.

"...but does that mean your voice and ours is the same? Or what it even means if that is the case? Do you even know?"

"Only that if it is The Darkness giving you this power, it's temporary and only furthers its own goals, not yours. We need to somehow determine where it's coming from and find what The Darkness has taken over. Then we have to put a stop to it before your world gets devoured."

"Forgive me if I'm wrong, but are you talking about ending warlocky?" He seemed a bit upset at the thought.

"Presumably whatever is making you warlocks would remain, it just wouldn't be under the control of a multi-dimensional being that sees you all as ants."

"I see," he answered slowly, not convinced. "What do you want from us?"

"Information, I suppose, to start. Maybe do a few spells of my own on you, or sense you out. Then figure out where the power is coming from."

"We know where it's coming from, we all end up flying there once we use too much power."

"Technically," corrected Susan, "after you fail a RESolve check, difficulty five plus one one-thousandth of the total warlock energy you've accumulated."

Everyone stared at her. "Uh, what?" asked Ithinia.

"That's what's been recorded on my character sheet," she said, having it appear and showing it to them. They crowded around to read it. "See, I was at eight before, now I'm at nine warlock energy gained because I lifted that table. Each time I activate the power, and every four seconds after that I get another. I would assume it's the same for you?"

"I have no idea how to... to... quantify the amount of energy I receive from using magic."

"Pity. Anyway, those that use the power more slowly, or have a stronger willpower will be able to hold out longer. But eventually even I would fail that check, and that would be it for me. Whatever gets you guys would get me, too."

"You can actually think in absolute terms like this?" asked Ithinia.

"I'm not the only one," she explained. "I met people on one other world that were similar. Different, but with a similar knowing of how injured they were, or how much magic power they had, or their exact strength. I miss those guys. Plus everyone on my father's world was this way."

"Naturally. Well, it seems we've all learned something about warlocks today. You can actually mathematically predict when a warlock will be called! Just based on the number of hours they've spent using their magic."

"So it seems," managed Gorsedd. "But that seems... just a moment." He glanced over at a desk, and a paper and pen floated over to him. He started writing some things down, asking Susan how much energy per hour she would gain, and about various other points. He shook his head. "It's too fast. If what you say is true, warlocks wouldn't last a day using their powers, much less a month. I've been chairman thirteen years, after all."

"It could be different for me. Tell you what, would you mind performing a little experiment?"

"Not at all, if it can help solve this mystery. And I did ask you to do things for me, after all."

"Exactly. Could you three go over there?" She pointed to the corner of the room. "I'm going to focus my senses on Gorsedd here. I want to see how quickly he gets energy when he uses warlocky. Your being nearby will muddle the waters, so to speak."

"You can tell?" asked Sativola.

"I hope so. If I tune out everything else, I think it'll work. I can at least try. Oh, and *Augment Skill: Spirit Sense.*"

With the spell going, Susan had absolute mastery of her sense of spirit energy, and was able to determine that this warlock, at least, gained energy at a rate closer to one per minute than fifteen in that span. (She rolled a twenty six to tell this.)

"That's somewhat reassuring," said Gorsedd, coming back to the floor again from where he had been hovering. "But why do you get it so quickly?"

She shrugged. "Are there some warlocks that get powerful more quickly than others? It may be that you all gain energy at your own pace. Without sensing out many more warlocks and coming up with testable theories, anyway."

"Some warlocks were called before others, on the first night," he admitted. "And we discourage those that seem to gain strength too quickly from using their power freely."

"That's smart. Doesn't help at the moment, but I can see why you would do that. Okay. I want to keep sensing things out with you guys, is there a warlock I can watch work? I don't want to increase your own chances of being called, even if you gather this energy slower than I do."

"Ah, we can check. I don't follow the normal day to day work that warlocks perform. I'm just here so that warlocks have representation among magic users." His eyes flicked to the

wizard.

"Tell me about it," muttered Sativola.

"Humm... You wizards do run things with an iron fist, don't you?" Susan remarked.

"By necessity," Ithinia answered.

"No doubt you think so. Anyway, let's find a warlock and see what's on the schedule for today!"

So the group traveled down "Wizard" street, looking for a warlock, and they found a girl several years older than Susan leaving her shop.

"Chairman!" she exclaimed. "How nice to see you."

"You too, Sloanne. You wouldn't be headed to a job now would you?" he asked hopefully.

"Why, yes, I am. Finnobarr son of Calder is sick, so they wanted me to see what I could do for him."

"Kelder?" asked Susan.

She laughed. "No, Calder. Apparently his parents wanted him to be unique, but not *that* unique."

Susan laughed with her. "I guess so!"

"Good timing. Sloanne, this is Susan. Susan, Sloanne the Warlock. And this is Ithinia the wizard."

"Sativola the Witch... apprentice," Sativola introduced herself.

"A witch and a wizard? Is the world coming to an end?" She forced a laugh, but stopped when no one laughed with her. "Have I done something wrong?"

"What? No, no, nothing like that! No, Susan just wants to observe you as you work. She's also a war- a wizard?" Susan nodded. "Yes, a wizard. Of course. Some questions have been raised about our magic and she's an expert that's been called in to help. You just happened to be passing, it's nothing against you personally."

"Oh. Well, I guess that's okay. As long as Calder agrees."

"Would he refuse two wizards?" Ithinia asked icily.

"Uh, no, probably not."

"Then lead on."

Hey, she's like you, remarked The Darkness. *Using thinly veiled threats of violence to get her way.*

Excuse me!? My threats of violence are made very, very plain, thank you very much.

I was trying to give you the benefit of the doubt, but if you insist.

Wait, did I just... never mind.

And so with more than a little puzzlement, Calder allowed a bunch of random people in off the street who claimed to be wizards, the chairman of the warlock council, a witch, and a cat. (Actually anyone could see Sparkle was a cat. That wasn't really in question.)

Susan then watched Sloanne work, destroying viruses inside the child's body to make him well again. She had to switch over to "warlock sight" to see it, and gained another energy in the process. But that's exactly what she saw Sloanne doing, and mentioned the method to Sativola.

"Could you do that?" she asked.

She shook her head. "I can't work on that level. I can heal a break by forcing the body to accelerate the healing process. And if what you've said is true I could even take it further and regenerate limbs lost to fire and such. But healing like this is beyond my abilities."

"Huh."

She was actually rather torn. On the one hand, she could set this child to rights in one second, just by touching him with the knife. On the other, she needed to watch this lady work so she could figure out a little bit more about warlock power. Even if that led to her being called that much sooner.

Susan sighed and got down to work. She felt around with *Spirit Sense* again, and timed

out how quickly she felt Sloanne was getting energy. It was probably a little bit slower than the chairman, but that could be because of the work she was doing. Many more tests would be needed, but she filed it away.

Her next check was *Magic Sense*, which gave her a very odd result indeed. If what Sloanne was doing was magic, it wasn't any she had sensed before. And really, she had been surprised how little magic was involved in witchcraft, while working with Sativola during the boat ride. But she did have the *Spark*, while this woman before her clearly did not. *So how the heck can she be doing 'magic' without it? Unless they just call it magic, because they call anything without any immediate cause magic?*

Finally she took a look with *Dimension Sense*, and this was even more interesting. She felt not that Sloanne was extra dimensional, but that her head *was*. Also the *power* she was using felt like it didn't belong here, as she went about zapping viruses out of the boy. The boy had just the faintest sense of not belonging, which faded quickly as Sloanne moved to a new area of his body. Susan took another few warlock energy looking inside her head, and trying to narrow down what she was sensing.

"Must you?" asked Sloanne. "I'm trying to work here!"

"What? You can feel that? Sorry!"

"That's fine." she sighed, as it clearly wasn't. "I thought you were a wizard, anyway."

"It's complicated?"

"Right. Just let me work, please."

Susan went back to just her own skills, and realized there was a difference between the chairman and the warlock before her. Both should feel the same, but one was using the "magic" and one wasn't. The chairman didn't feel like he didn't belong here, but Sloanne almost did. Sort of like an echo or being very far away from the thing that didn't belong.

Which makes sense, if they really are drawing a power you're somehow giving them. This is the best proof you're behind this.

Me? I'm just along for the ride you know?

Don't get cute. I know one of you is the same as any other of you.

Oh, you're an expert on multi-dimensional life forms now, are you?

Are you denying it?

What's the information worth to you?

What could you possibly want from me that you could charge me for?

You really have to ask?

...

...

Are you playing 'questions only' with me or something?

What if I am? It's boring, just watching you try and figure stuff out I already know. But I can't just tell you, we're enemies. His tone changed to be more thoughtful. *But at the same time I'm a part of you, so am I really just fighting myself? The larger philosophical considerations-*

Oh, forget it!

Susan looked over the *Reveal* series of spells, but didn't find anything pertinent to cast. Having done everything she could think of she left the warlock and the family in peace and went back out into the street.

"This much I can tell you. The Darkness is responsible, I felt it in the power she was using. We have to find this source, protect me somehow from being called while I look it over, and figure out how to deal with it once and for all."

"Good luck with that," both the wizard and warlock said, then glared at each other.

Yeah, this one's going to be tough.

The End of the World

Place: Wizard's guild building

Time: About a half hour later, say 2:30 in the afternoon.

"But there must be some way of going about it!" protested Susan, speaking to the group of wizards that had been called to discuss their next steps.

"We lost half a dozen wizards trying to get close enough to see it when it first arrived," protested one. "You want to get near it, you're on your own."

Susan looked around the room, and everyone was nodding.

"Certainly *your* magic, as superior as it is, would be better suited to this task anyway," suggested Ithinia smugly.

"It's not that easy. If it was magic, yes, I could put *Magic Immunity* on and be set. But he's doing something physical to people that get to near- changing their brains. I don't think *Invulnerability* would even protect me, because it's not damage. And any sort of scrying spell I use is useless because I haven't seen the place, or know even remotely what I'm looking for."

"What about that out of body stuff you were talking to me about?" asked Sativola. "Do you have a spell like that?"

"Sort of. There's *Clairvoyance*, that can let me see things at a remote location. But I must 'know something of the location' and just knowing there's an object laying in some field someplace is not good enough. I can't ask to see "the place the object fell on the night of madness," only specific locations, like "beyond this door" or "The house of Illina the Quick." As far as leaving my body like an ESPer, there's *Projection*, but that only works to places I can see, and I can't 'leave the general target location.' An ESPer would be able to just think themselves there, and look around as if with their own eyeballs."

"So your magic is not all powerful," remarked Ithinia.

"No," grumped Susan. "This sort of thing especially seems tailor made to annoy me. I mean it's magic, I should be able to just point to a map and ask my magic to show me that location in real time. But nooooo."

"Actually, why wouldn't that work?" asked Sparkle. "Do you really think that's not enough of knowing 'something' of the location?"

Susan pondered a moment. "I guess 'behind this door' and 'this spot on the map' would be equivalent, right?"

"That's what I'm thinking."

"The problem is we can't point to an area and conclusively say 'that's where the object is.' Our scrying magic doesn't work in that whole region," put in another wizard.

"Probably something The Darkness came up with," mused Susan.

"You don't suppose you're immune, do you?" asked a third wizard. "Being from another world, and all?"

"Wouldn't want to chance it."

"True."

"Why do you ask though? Is there a way you could get me to the general area?"

"That spell we used to get to that town where we first met," said Ithinia. "The transporting flute would work just fine. A warlock would go by every so often, you could just follow them. You can fly just as fast as they can, right?"

"Yes. Actually there is a spell to see through another's eyes. I could cast it on them as it went by, and be in no danger as the already called warlock got closer. I would go blind though, so that's a down side."

"And a further delay, while you waited for one. I would rather this whole thing was cleared up quickly."

You and me both.

Actually, said The Darkness, I wouldn't mind guiding you there directly, if it'll help speed things along.

Really?

Sure!

You would help me out?

It's more like helping myself out, honestly. Oh man, I wish I could see your face when you realize how hopeless your situation is. I guess I'll just have to enjoy it from in here.

"I don't like it," Susan said.

"Why shouldn't you like taking care of this quickly and moving on with your journey?"

"What? Oh, no, The Darkness was talking to me. I think I should stay away from that whole area, he's just about drooling with anticipation of me going there. Or something. It's... up to something, for lack of a better term. The piece I carry said it would lead me to the piece that's here, just to get things rolling. I get the idea it has some crazy spectacle in mind and is getting bored with waiting for me. I really don't want it coming to me across the whole of Ethshar though, so maybe I should get out there. I remember it burning villages when it took over the dragon. I don't want to see that again."

"Then we had best move quickly. You really have no ideas?"

"Do you have telescopes in this world? Binoculars at least?" She got blank looks. "I guess not."

"What about that spell you used to harass Professor Umbrage that one time?" asked Sparkle.

"Which one? I used quite a few, as you'll recall."

"Yes, I do. I was thinking about making a copy of yourself from mud. Go to the area with the flute spell as we've not seen it. Then let the thing lead you to itself. You'll be perfectly safe because your body will be back here."

"*Plastic Proxy!* Hey, that could work," Susan admitted. "And if I leave off the spell that lets me cast spells through it, the link will be even more tenuous. No way it could reach through and get me from where it is. Okay, let's give it a shot!"

"It will take several hours to prepare flutes for the way there and back. What do you need from us?"

"The same volume of mud as my body." More blank stares. "Enough mud that a person my size could conceivably rise from it," she amended.

The wizards got to work.

About five that evening, Susan's mud avatar with *Flight* cast on it by Sparkle stepped from the tunnel created by wizardry.

"And you're sure about this?" asked Ithinia.

"There is no other precaution I can take. I'll see you back at in Ethhar when I've seen what I need to see here."

"Okay. Good luck."

Another moment, and Ithinia was gone.

So which direction?

..

Hello?

..

Oh, for the love of-

What's that? Oh, you're there. Sorry, I was in the bathroom. Yeah, let's go.

In the- She sighed. *And I suppose you've put a pool table in there somewhere, what with you being bored and whatnot?*

Susan heard the sounds of pool balls being bounced around.

What? I was concentrating on my shot.

Which way, darn it?

Oh, right. Stick your finger out.

You mean this one? She held a specific finger up in front of her face.

Very funny. But meaningless to a being like myself. No, out in front of you, that's it.

Now slowly turn to the right. Keep turning. Keep turning. Little more. Stop. Okay, that's not the direction you want to go in.

I thought you wanted to get on with this?

Oh, but teasing you is so fun. Fine, it actually is that way.

I swear, if you are lying to me, I will find a way to crawl inside my own soul and choke the life out of you.

You really should see someone about all that anger you've got pent up in here. Oh wait, maybe that's my fault? Eh, who can tell anymore. Pip pip!

I'll pip pip you...

Susan Clone rose into the air and started flying in the direction The Darkness said to go.

She passed many a ruined house, broken down roads, and finally a forest. According to the wizards, whole villages had been emptied when this first happened, and the whole area had been deserted since. In thirty years, that meant a lot of plant life had opportunity to thrive, and thriving it was.

The sun was setting at her left, causing long shadows to form that made the silence and emptiness of the area that much more creepy.

Close now. So close! You should just be able to see it.

What? Where?

There! You can't miss it!

What? That dark spot?

Just keep going.

From her vantage point high above it was difficult to tell what that dark spot on the landscape was, but judging from the shadow it was casting along the ground it was pretty tall. Flying as fast as she did, it didn't take long to get close and she landed at the edge of the mound, then walked around it to get a better look without the sun in her eyes. As she came around the side, she realized the mound wasn't earth, or stone, but rather people.

People as still as the grave.

"Warlocks," she breathed, trying to estimate how many were here.

That's right. Every called warlock in the world. They've all gathered here, at my insistence.

But why? Did you kill them?

Kill them? My loyal soldiers? Perish the thought, Susan. No, I need them to destroy this world for me, only then will they die and relinquish the energy I have... loaned. Would you like to see me now?

Not especially.

Too bad.

Susan wasn't sure how, but she knew The Darkness was happy. Every eye suddenly opened, and the mass of bodies started to rise and expand, and Susan took a nervous step back. Then another. Then another, until she rose into the air again and skimmed backwards, as more and more warlocks silently floated from the pit. They didn't look around. They didn't speak. All they did was stare at her. And still more emerged.

The warlocks had arranged themselves in a kind of grid, extending in three dimensions with about a meter and a half between them. In the setting sun the faces of only those that were closest were visible, and they all seemed happy. Suddenly, something bright was rising from the pit, and the warlocks flowed around the thing. It seemed to be a drop of food coloring moving through clear water, but up rather than down. As it passed, the warlocks that had moved out of the way went back, all silently, never out of place. The object was vaguely round, with what looked like tentacles and other odd protuberances sticking out all over it. It floated to the center of the mass of warlocks, and suddenly each said a single word.

"Susan."

Susan had never really felt that much fear in her life up to that point. Oh, she was somewhat concerned about certain things, certainly. And anger over various happenings was only natural, but this? Susan hung in the air, confronted by warlocks in numbers she couldn't begin to estimate, and knew there was no way even her considerable magic could take that many.

“Susan,” they repeated again. The voices, molded together and speaking with perfect timing reverberated across the landscape.

“Yes?” she squeaked.

“How nice to see you. Tell me, does this form please you more than mighty dragons or those who would be gods? Is this more fitting than one winged angels or a simple darkness inside a soul? Here, I am legion. Tell me, do you see your death in my army of warlocks? I cultivated them quite carefully, in case a so called hero or two came to this world, seeking to save it from me. How delightful it was you, my newest thorn, that I now get to snap off. We shall see just how powerless you are against me. Quake and fear, for there is nowhere on this world you can run that will be safe!”

In the back of her mind, even through all the fear, Susan noticed that even this part of him liked to talk.

“I do not seek safety,” she threw back at him. “Only a world free of you.”

The mass of people laughed, chilling her further. “Bold. Always so bold. Well, things will not go so well for you this time, I fear.” Every arm came up, pointing behind her. “Behold the merest fraction of my power!”

Susan risked a quick look behind her, and saw the reason for that shadow that had been coming up behind her this whole time. An enormous block of stone, pulled out of the ground so silently she hadn’t even noticed, and now moving faster than a jet plane, slammed into her.

Cra-

Her mud form burst and she gasped, sitting up in the bed she had been laying in back at the wizard’s guild building.

“What happened?” demanded Sparkle. “Are you all right?”

“Warlocks!” Susan gasped, the shock of being dispersed not doing her any favors.

“What? What did you see?” asked Ithinia.

“Warlocks,” she repeated. “All of them. All the called warlocks are still alive. They’ve gone under the control of The Darkness.” She grabbed Ithinia’s robes. “You have to spread the word! No one can use warlock power any more. To do so just makes the army grow.” She felt something happening to her, *everything at once!* and grabbed out her *character sheet*. She stared in horror as the description of the calling was now ten times easier to succumb to, being now divided by only a hundred, rather than a thousand.

Yes, I was hoping you would use it a bit more. Play with it like a new toy, but you were not obliging in the least. I would have loved to have added your magic to my abilities, traveled worlds with you helping me take them over, rather than fighting me. As it was intended! Ah well, you’re dead, which is my second choice.

“They’re all going to be called!”

“Slow down!” demanded the wizard. “What are you babbling about?”

“Warlocks!” she shrieked. “What do you think? They didn’t die, they’ve just been waiting. For someone like me to show up. The Darkness took over that thing that fell from the sky, some kind of space faring creature. Now *it’s* taken over all the warlocks in the world, or at least most of them. We have to get ready!”

“Do you... do you even know what this means?” Ithinia was pale.

“War,” Susan replied simply. “And one that can-”

“Susan!” The voice came from outside, and the roof of the place started to collapse, then be blown outward to show a man hovering in the air above the place.

Sparkle reacted. “Accelerate *Magic!*” she cast, getting it instantly.

Susan realized what she wanted her to do. “*Hypnotic Field!*” she cast, now able to cut the time to nothing without suffering as much of a penalty. She also threw in maximum energy, getting a nineteen, more than the warlock could hope for on a REASON check. The attack stopped- at least the man’s attack, anyway. Susan wasted no time getting out her *Elemental Weapon* and Sparkle put *Flight* on her, allowing her to slam the warlock through the chest with the blade, knocking him out with sixty two non-lethal damage. She looked around, and it looked like other black clothed forms were flying towards her, as specks could be seen in the distance.

“What is going on?” asked Ithina as Susan tossed the limp warlock to the bed. She

took a moment to steal his energy so hers would be replenished, but didn't know exactly how much to take because of how they got energy from The Darkness. *How soon will he wake up from all this? It could be life or death for the people here if I'm not around.* She took forty to be on the safe side, then debated casting *Repair* on the roof. It was pretty much gone, so the difficulty would be pretty high, and The Darkness knew where she was anyway. She left it.

"I have to get out of here, or at least prepare. You need to prepare too. Put every warlock in the city to sleep, then start putting up barrier spells so the rest can't get in. I don't know how long it'll take them to fly here, but they will. Maybe they'll stop to destroy towns on the way in, maybe not. I can't say. I may be their first target, so if you can hold them off—"

"Stop! Hold on here. You're leaving? You give me some raving explanation about warlocks, get attacked, kill this man, and now you're talking about leaving?"

"I don't have time. Why didn't I *save* before I went over there? Not that it would have mattered, he could have emerged at any time."

"Time!" shouted Sparkle. "Use *Time Suspension!*"

"Good idea!" Susan hastily got out her book of magic and started paging through.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Buying us some time to explain. Good thing I've read this book over a million times. Ah, here."

Susan cast, taking the extra 4 segments, which negated the plus four difficulty from casting from writings. She put in some energy, but not max, and got enough to cast the spell. That done she breathed a sigh of relief and snapped the book shut. She set it down in midair but before taking her hand off it, thought better of it and put it back in her sub-space pocket.

If I let it go, I won't be able to pick it back up again, it'll go outside time just like everything else is now.

"Okay, we can talk now. Can't believe I never put *that* one into a *Spell Paper*. Maybe I'll do that... when I get the *time*."

"Is now really the—" Sparkle didn't finish her thought. Susan gave her a little grin like "go on, say it!"

"Can you please explain what is going on?" asked Ithinia.

"Now I can," replied Susan. She told her what she had seen, and about how warlocks were now being controlled against their will. "And for the record, I didn't kill this guy. That sword is specifically made for knocking people out."

"But if you're right, he'll stop at nothing to kill you! Every warlock will."

"And that means I should just kill them? Like I said, they aren't doing this on their own. They wouldn't do this on their own. Take out The Darkness, and they'll all return to normal. Without powers, even. It's win-win, right?"

"But The Darkness is now protected by thousands of warlocks, and all of them are as strong as warlocks can possibly be because they were all called."

"I didn't say it would be easy!"

"It isn't even hard, it's impossible!"

"I admit, the thought of battling through that line I saw, even with *Slash-All*, seems a bit daunting. But I can guarantee you, The Darkness is already on the move. We have no time to prepare anything if we're to protect your world. You need to get every magic user possible together and to the edge of Ethshar. Put up what barriers you can, and somehow support me while I... kill that innocent space creature... Dang."

"Seems he's set this up pretty well," remarked Sparkle.

"You have no idea. It's not magic, so I can't just use *Dead Magic* or *Destroy Magic* and turn people like this guy into non-warlocks again. My book could probably come up with a spell if I could somehow put a warlock on top of it for hours, but good luck with that. Plus if I was around the creature, he could probably shut my magic down like he did before. Oh dad, why did you have to get caught?!"

"Lament things later. Right now we need to think of first steps, and how to contain this magical war that's coming. We've already had one great war, we didn't need a second. That one set every discipline, from magic to candle making, back hundreds of years. And there were no warlocks then, so I can't imagine what this war is going to be like."

Brief, smugly put in The Darkness.

This is why you were so excited to be here. You knew what I was facing here.

Correct. I'll make you deal. Leave. Go back to Silverstreak or whatever he's calling himself now and stop your journey. I'll give you the coordinates for the world Luna landed on, and heck, I'll even throw in your father, if he agrees to settle down. Go get Luna, head back to your world, and stay there. That's what you want, isn't it? You don't care about these people, why should you die for them?

You... know where Luna is?

Susan, Susan, Susan. I'm spread across the multi-verse right now, remember? Time may run differently between worlds but what is time to me? Of course I know where she is. Duh. She's around a lot of people that like to wave swords about at this very moment. Hope she doesn't get cut to ribbons, some of them look pretty deranged. And what's with all those black kimonos those guys are wearing? And check out the boobs on that one, even I'm impressed! And I don't have human physiology!

Shu- Shut up! You're lying!

Am I?

"Susan?"

"Just a second!"

Look, I "appreciate" it at all, but take your deal and shove it. My father started journeying to stop you. Now I'm doing the same. I won't just turn my back on these people. Even if that means... sacrificing Luna. Though I doubt you're even telling the truth, you just want to rattle me, keep me from thinking clearly.

Believe what you want. I figured you wouldn't, but I had to ask. The offer stays open, if you get scared when three thousand warlocks start tearing you to pieces. I'll call them off, all you have to do is say 'yes' to me. Make me believe it, of course. Give up, in other words. I'll know, you can't fool yourself.

Never.

You always were a stubborn one.

"Sorry, The Darkness was trying to bribe me into leaving. I turned him down."

"Which means there's a chance?" Sparkle asked.

"There must be. He wouldn't bother to try taking me away from here if I was totally useless. No, there must be something I can do."

"But what?" asked Sativola.

Susan shook her head sadly. "At the moment, I really have no idea."

Slice... to Wound

Time: Subjectively, twenty minutes later

Place: Bubble of stopped time, wizard guild building

“Why not this spell?” asked Ithinia, making a general “around here” gesture. She and Susan had been looking through her book to see what spells might help in this situation, as well as making plans for what to do when *Time Suspension* ended. “Stopping time like this seems pretty convenient. Why not just go back there, stop time, and set something up to happen when it starts again?”

“Like I said, The Darkness, the main body not just one of these warlocks it’s controlling, can negate my magic. It’s something it learned how to do from my father, who also had that gift.”

“So if it sees you cast any spell it just sends specific magical energies at you, which negate it?”

“Yes.”

“Harsh. But you could protect this city with it?”

“I suppose. But honestly it’s just faster to beat up whatever comes looking for me. Those warlocks I saw in the distance will be here shortly, and I can’t be inside this spell when I face them. I mean I could put up *Hypnotic Field* inside here, but they would get the same resistance check against it as they normally would once time starts again. Better just to cast it from the start.”

“Even if they throw, say, a house at you?”

“Just how much weight can warlocks lift?”

“A lot. Especially if they work together. Now, these local ones won’t be as strong as ones who have been called, but they’re dangerous all the same.”

“Which is why you better think of ways to deal with them, because I can’t be everywhere at once. Anyplace I’m not is going to be under attack, and that means all across Ethshar at the least, everyone is in danger.”

“We do have a high concentration of warlocks here, it’s only natural. The money is here. But getting the word out...”

“Yes, I still can’t believe you have no magic for quickly spreading information. Even just among wizards, to think you’ll have to send people to knock on doors and such. I just can’t believe you didn’t plan for something like this.”

“That warlocks would go insane and start attacking us? No, didn’t really cross our minds once they started getting called. I mean it was always a possibility, but no one ever really took any responsibility to plan for such an event.”

“I can see that. Not every world gets an Albus Dumbledore, I guess. And even he missed a lot. Okay, let’s figure out the next... hour or so. This spell drops and time resumes. What happens?”

“I’ll go start spreading the word about warlocks being controlled. I’ll get all the wizards together and see what spells might be useful in this situation. Don’t get your hopes up, there probably won’t be many.”

“But what about this magical war everyone’s always talking about?”

“That was still fought mostly with soldiers. Sure, wizards contributed, and spells had terrible effects on the land. But a lot of those sorts of spells were lost, or they targeted too wide an area. Those wizards had hours, days even, to prepare storms or curses or earthquakes against enemy *territory*. We need to take down just a few individuals and in a very short time, while leaving everything else standing. Plus, that was a war- we were trying to kill the enemy. You want these warlocks taken alive so hopefully they can be released when you get rid of this darkness thing.”

“I’m glad you’ve not fighting me on that one.”

“For now. If the situation becomes desperate, I can’t tell other wizards not to defend themselves.”

“I know. Sativola?”

"I'll go down Wizard Street and gather any magic user I think will be helpful. Tell them to come here. Any warlocks not far enough gone to still be themselves I'll tell to not do any more magic, and maybe to come here too?" She looked over at Ithinia, who nodded.

"Better safe than sorry. We'll have to keep an eye on them."

"I just hope I can convince them."

"If their fellow warlocks start tearing the place up, I think they'll be convinced pretty quickly," said Susan.

"Is there a danger of that?"

"Sure. The Darkness would want to eliminate the people that can best resist first. That means magic users."

"Oh."

"Problem is," said Sparkle, "even with all the magic users in the world at our side, we're still basically alone. None of them have what we call battle magic. Wizardry takes too long. Witchcraft can't really compare to warlocks. Demons would be useful, but they would want to kill, so that's probably out. I don't know much about what gods you have around here, if they might help."

Ithinia shook her head. "They don't even see warlocks anymore. Probably a side effect of being changed by the darkness. It's from outside the world, so they have no way of perceiving it."

"That raises a good point, what would have happened if The Darkness hadn't come here? I mean that dragon would have busted out and Louise and her friends might have been able to deal with it. That's what void magic was for. Aerith would have died, but Cloud and the rest could have taken Sephiroth, heck, they basically did, I couldn't damage him directly. And Balor of the Ugly Face wasn't even a part of it, so that would have been handled just fine. If I wasn't here, if The Darkness hadn't taken over all warlocks, what would have happened instead?" The witch and wizard shared a confused look. "I mean we know what it is now, a big space monster creature thing. Maybe it wouldn't even have even come here?"

"We may never know," remarked Sativola.

"It is odd, if it really is a thinking creature, why it would have landed here in the first place," agreed Ithinia. "But speculation is pointless. We have work to do. How far can we get before we leave this bubble of stopped time?"

"Not far. Get as far as you can and when you see things moving again, assume I am too. I'll head to the three Ethshar cities I've been to and see if I can't knock down any warlocks making trouble. That done I'll drain them, bring them back here, and you guys can hopefully lock them up somewhere."

"I'll see what I can come up with," promised Ithinia.

"By then I should be brimming with energy again, maybe I can just *Phase* my way close to The Darkness and... do something to him. Maybe *knockout* would work? I hate to kill the alien."

"First things first," cautioned Sparkle. "We have to protect the city. We can stop time again if we have to before taking him on. And we'll have more magic by then, wizard magic, that we can throw at it too. Just because you can't effect the world, doesn't mean they couldn't prepare a bunch of spells in the no-time zone. They could do wizardry of hours in a subjective second!"

"True. And maybe you can use your *Colossus* again, distract him? Yeah, no."

"Good luck to us all, then."

The four nodded, and the two women scampered out of the room about their tasks.

And now for mine.

Susan began activating her *Spell Papers* and *Materia*, but left *Slash-All* off for the moment. The Darkness knew about that, so they would probably stay out of range. She would have to hit them with *Elemental Burst* and hope for the best. That didn't stop her getting out her *Knockout* sword though. She used one of her *Spell Papers* for *Avatar*, rather than getting out her *Crystal Blade*.

I don't want to kill one, even by accident. Not if I don't have to. Even if it's just for the selfish reason of taking their energy when they're down.

Sparkle took one with *Invulnerability* on it, figuring up to that point no one had attacked

a “mere” cat. But The Darkness knew what she could do, so it wouldn’t hurt to be prepared. “I won’t be much help though,” she reminded Susan. “Most of what I know is *Line*, or *Touch*, so that’s pretty useless. Plus I’ll be maintaining your stuff, like *Flight* and *Acceleration*.”

“You could stay here, you don’t have to risk it, *companion* or not.”

“I’ll stick close. I’ll be maintaining *Accelerate Magic*, just to give you that much more of an edge.”

“I appreciate it.” Susan looked up through the hole. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Let’s get going then. *Save*.” Susan dropped the last *Spell Paper* to the ground and the two took to the sky. As they passed beyond the initial radius of the *Time Suspension* spell it broke, and events went into motion again.

From what she could tell, several warlocks were causing havoc in the streets, hovering above and just telekinetically smashing everything they saw. Susan couldn’t hear any screams yet, but she was sure there were people down there dying. Another group was heading towards her, and she met them halfway, desperate to take them down quickly and stop those others. They spread out, as The Darkness knew she wanted to use *Burst* on them even as she had thought it. So these warlocks knew, too.

Susan wanted to shout to them, “you’re being controlled, fight it!” but she knew that she was too far away, and that it would do little good. The Darkness had invaded these people’s brains, and changed them in some way to leave them totally under its control. She was sure nothing less would do for the creature.

Correct, said The Darkness. *I am all of them now, and I wonder what your Invulnerability will make of this?*

Each warlock snapped open a hand which started to arc with electricity, a strange red power that lit up their faces like being awash in blood.

You’ve got to be kiddi-

Susan didn’t even get to finish the thought as the warlocks didn’t even gesture, didn’t give any sign of attacking whatsoever, but the lighting in their hands struck forth with a fury. Susan was concerned for an instant that he had somehow granted them some magical power, and only her *Giant’s Soul* would save her now, but she found there was no pain. She was stunned, having the equivalent of several bolts of lightning stabbing into your eyes at once will do that, magical resistance to physical damage or not.

The warlocks were fast. They could be, because The Darkness didn’t mind sending them energy to cut their *delay*, and Susan found herself being hurled out of the sky at a frightening speed. She crashed through a roof as the house she had struck imploded around her, pinning her inside. She felt the pressure continue, and realized line of sight meant nothing to these people- *warlocky can see inside things*.

And even if it couldn’t, put in The Darkness, *I know where you are*.

You know, you’re really starting to annoy me.

Then you know how I feel about you. Anyway, what’cha gonna do about it?

“This. *Phase*.” She didn’t have to move for that one, and could take the full time because she really couldn’t go anywhere anyway. Sparkle was too far away to help with the *Magic Acceleration*, but that didn’t matter in this case. The pressure fell away, and Susan went straight up, passing through the house on her way to the nearest warlock.

Dropping a spell was a reactive action, meaning it could be done at any time just by not concentrating on the spell anymore. Honestly, doing what Susan was about to do was probably against a strict reading of the rules, but with *Acceleration* having a one delay was hardly noticeable. (Besides, delay “happens” after you take the action, so this could work either way.) As Susan swung at the warlock she didn’t drop *Phase*, not until the blade was already inside the guy. That was the plan, anyway. It worked, she got a twenty six (with eight energy expended and accounting for penalties for *Phase*) while her opponent got a twenty four (with five energy expended) to dodge. As the blade passed through Susan dropped the spell, doing more than forty damage to him as the blade tore out the other side of him. It also

spat the sword out of his body, doing eight lethal damage to him as the two objects tried to occupy the same space. He started dropping.

Oh, crap, he'll die if he hits the ground from this high up. I declare the use of card 23, my Personal Stake in this is making sure none of them die.

She dove after him, but the second and third warlocks cared little for her concern, and sent a piece of rubble at her despite knowing it couldn't actually hurt her.

They're just trying to keep me from reaching him. They can't go for physical pain so they go for emotional?

Hey, I take what I can get.

Susan smashed through the debris with the sword hilt, figuring that no amount of non-lethal damage would chop through it. As clocking someone in the temple with the hilt would probably still be considered using the *Sword* skill, the narrator allowed her to roll that, at least smashing it out of the way. With her off hand she grabbed for the guy, this time using unarmed and putting energy into it. She got an eight, exactly enough to grab his hand and arrest his fall. She was still falling, trying to get out of range, when number four shot lightning at her again. She was going to try grabbing the guy up and protecting him with her body but Sparkle had been holding for just such an occurrence.

"Deflection," she cast, missing it by one. She hesitated- she had card twenty, *Missed Me*, but the bolt was aimed at Susan, so it would be fine, right?

The bolt struck, and the electricity surged through them both, causing the warlock to open his eyes and scream in agony before dropping unconscious again.

Looking down at him, Susan saw that he was now two into *gone*, his life hanging by a thread. He could take four more damage before he died, and he was bleeding from the sword wound so it wouldn't take long to lose that much.

"Heal him!" she shouted to Sparkle, who flew up, beginning to apologize.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Just regenerate him enough that he doesn't die."

"Okay."

She set him down as gently as she could, and Sparkle started casting *Regeneration*.

Susan turned, catching another two lightning bolts as she tried to cover the man, and now that she wasn't touching him they dissipated harmlessly. She tried to rise again, and had to make a STRength check to bust through the force that was trying to keep her rooted to the spot. This she did easily, bursting forth from the ground towards the nearest one that had just thrown lightning, figuring he would be unable to act by the time she got there.

She wasn't *Phased* at the moment, but figured that would be fine. She swung, but this time rather than dodging, the blade was deflected by a burst of force she couldn't get through, and she had to make a STRength check just to hold onto the weapon. All three smiled at her.

Oh great, they worked together for that one. But at least they all took the reactive delay for it.

Susan was still up, and decided to "*Phase*," spending just enough energy to guarantee success on her check as she did it instantly.

Sparkle's spell went off, and the wounded warlock started to heal. In another ten segments he would heal one damage, so it was going to take a few turns to see him safe.

Susan took another swing, and the warlocks, taking no chances, yanked their companion back even as she dodged in the air. She stayed with her, timing her attack to just impact her body when she dropped *Phase* so she wouldn't be as wounded as the first guy was. She did forty one damage to her body, and this time used her off hand action to grab her *before* she started falling. That worked, and Susan hoped she would get to act again before they did. (She was pretty sure she would, even with them just reacting defensively.)

Now she had a new problem, though. She had a sword in one hand, and the woman in the other. This would be fine if she could lower her gently to the ground, but Susan was in a bit of a hurry given she knew the other two would start shooting again. She reluctantly dropped the blade, making it vanish, and selected some debris she could cast *Transposition* on. Having a sword in your hand doesn't make for the quick movements Mercury spells required, though she could probably have taken a penalty or put more energy in.

The woman suddenly jerked, and Susan almost lost her grip in surprise, but realized it

wasn't the warlock herself moving about, the ones she was facing were trying to yank her away. Rather than make a STrength check to pull her back and potentially break her arm, (or at the very least, dislocate her shoulder) Susan let herself be dragged along. Unfortunately, the direction they were headed was down.

I can't just let her impact off of me, I'm armored up, that would probably be worse than the ground. How can I cushion her fall? Oh, I don't have to.

"Phase!" she cast, again putting energy in. They slipped through the ground, contact cut off now that they could no longer be touched physically. Susan could take her movement as part of the action, and popped up again, looking for a safe place to drop the warlock off.

With her twenty five LUCK check she found an overturned wagon and slipped behind it, out of sight.

Of course, they know right where I am because of that warlock sense they have. Still, it should keep this one out of the line of fire.

It burst apart, pieces flying everywhere, and Susan was exposed again, ducking down under the dirt in the street again.

You just have to be difficult, don't you?

How can I be otherwise? I can't hurt you with these guys, it seems. I'll have to think about that. You could have taken them easily if you didn't care about them splattering to the ground when they fell unconscious. And the longer this takes you, the more time the others have to wreak havoc over there.

The Darkness was right. *I need to finish this quickly. There's only two now, so they aren't as spread apart. I'll have to try getting them both.*

Susan, having no other place to put the body at this point, opened up her *Pocket Dimension* and shoved the lady through. "Don't touch any of my stuff," she joked, and poked her head out again to see where the two were. They were still drifting some meters from each other, but Susan was pretty sure she could get it between them and catch them both. *But I'll have to be within planet + stat meters, and I'm probably like ten away at this point. Good thing Neptune spells are REASON, which for me is an eight.*

Susan still didn't to let them know something was up, though they probably already did, and rather than casting for longer she made a *Spirit Manipulation* check. That gave her twenty one extra energy to spend, in addition to her normal ten, so she popped up, dropped *Phase*, cast instantly, and threw thirty energy into the spell. This made the radius thirty six meters, and her check result a forty two.

The warlocks seemed unimpressed, and in fact the one was merrily throwing more lighting around, probably just to show he could. The other was staring off into space with a purpose, but not slack jawed as people normally are when hit with that amount of hypnotic force.

Okay, what?

You do know that I know that's one of your favorite spells, right?

So? They couldn't have reacted fast enough, and they didn't go dodging out of that area, I can see they're still in it.

Why would they need to. Oh Susan, you just don't get it, do you? Anyone with their eyes closed is immune to the spell!

... They've been fighting me with their eyes closed.

That's right! Give that girl a... well, not a cigar, smoking is bad for you. Maybe a bubblegum one? Ah, live a little, have one. Maybe a glass of whisky as well. Might mellow you out a little.

So they're using the warlock sight to see me, in anticipation of that spell. Bravo.

Thanks. And you can't just knock them out with Burst, because then they would fall and splat. I suppose you could try and catch both at the same time...

Or I could just do this.

Susan strode over to a piece of wood, a beam from a house that had been smashed to pieces. Part of it was on fire, but that didn't matter to her. She smacked it into the ground so it

stood up and let *Field* go, making the warlock shooting lightning turn his attention back onto her. The other was still doing his own thing.

Now what?

Watch and learn, fool.

Susan first got her *Knockout* blade back, then took extra time, casting *Transposition* on the beam and on the warlock. She didn't release it yet, as a spell can be held and released later just fine. Instead she aimed for where she figured the warlock's body would be with the sword, bringing it up like a bat. The warlock, meanwhile, was dodging this way and that, trying to get the magical circle under his feet to go away, but the magic paced him. When everything was ready she let the spell go, and the beam became a surprised warlock.

A surprised warlock still trying to dodge the magic by flying at high speed. In her haste, Susan had forgotten that momentum was preserved with teleport style spells, and this one was no exception.

Susan made another LUCk check, a twelve, and yes, he was flying right towards her. She got a thirteen on her REFlexes check to see if she could get out of the way, but even with *Acceleration* going the two collided. Susan made a STRength check out of sheer reflex to not be knocked over, getting a thirty five. In hindsight, this was a pretty terrible idea. The warlock, made of meat and bone like any other creature crashed into the pillar of magical metal that surrounded Susan, *Giant's Soul* and all. His head and body shattered against her, spattering her with blood as he almost died instantly. He too was hanging by a thread, and Susan, horrified, dropped her sword for the second time.

Oh, fabulously done. Imagine the damage you could be doing if you were actually trying to kill these guys. As it is you've near killed half of them and that's without even trying. The Darkness dissolved into giggles.

Instead of replying she grabbed up her knife, hesitated a moment because this would possibly wake him up, and touched it to him. Now usually she just held it there until everything was fine again, but this time she pulled it away immediately. It healed "as much Lethal damage as twice her Sun rating" as it was designed to do. This turned out to be eight, so while still covered in blood and possibly some brain matter, he was no longer in any danger of dying.

Susan noticed a dark shadow passing over her, and risked a glance up. From somewhere, possibly a nearby well, a ball of water was hovering over her.

"You've got to be kidding."

Well, it worked with me last time, didn't it? I'm just giving you a taste of how it was back then. You can't be damaged, true enough, but you still have to breathe.

As the ball descended Susan spent her *Extra Action* card, number 9, to throw this warlock into her *Pocket Dimension* as well, then put on *Breathe Water*.

It crashed into her and the surroundings with lethal force, crushing the nearby structures and hammering into her.

I really hope Sparkle wasn't in range of that.

"*Elemental Weapon*," she cast, realizing it might be best to make that into some sort of *Imbuing* if she was going to keep turning it on and off like a light bulb. "*Telesummon*" was her next spell, cast with the extra time and extra energy, though she only had thirty left now. (She had used *Transposition* before because of the bonus from *Acceleration*, she didn't have to put as much energy in to still have it work.) It was twenty four to twenty three, winner Susan, and she cleaved through the man as he tried to not drown, figure out why he was now inside the ball of water, push the water away, and dodge all at the same time. The water released its shape and splashed down around her, washing away some of the blood from her armor, at least.

"That's over," she sighed.

You aren't forgetting those warlocks over there, are you?

Susan wearily raised her eyes to the warlocks in the distance, heading straight for her.

Going to be one of those days.

Defending the Town

Time: Moments later

Place: Ethshar of the Spices

Susan wasted no time. She hastily drew forty energy from the waterlogged warlock before her, then tumbled the other two from her *Pocket Dimension*. She stole forty from each of them, raising her total from thirty two up to a hundred and fifty two. Then she stopped dead as a thought struck her.

Draining energy causes non-lethal damage, right? Each point a person loses past negative their ENDurance becomes a point of non-lethal damage to the body. But here, she touched her knife, I have a knife that heals all non-lethal damage with a touch. Can I shove this knife into someone, leave it there, and then drain unlimited energies from them? Huh.

She was somewhat tempted to try it, but that could have some kind of lasting, detrimental effect on whoever she did it to. *Besides, I have more important things to be doing. Like finding Sparkle.*

That, sadly, was going to be a problem, as Susan had no idea really which way she had gone after leaving her side. The force of the ball of water had washed away any markers she might have used, and with the nearby houses and such blasted to pieces there was no way for her to know which way to go. *I could have used that extra energy, too. Oh well. Stay safe, Sparkle.*

As she looked around, she now noticed a fair number of dead, and shook her head at the waste. *But really this is only the beginning. One opponent at a time, Susan.*

She rose into the air, daring the next group of warlocks to come to her. She figured this area was already wrecked up, and anyone there would have fled by now. So why put some other street in danger as well?

Susan regarded the five warlocks that she could now see *clearly* coming towards her. This time it was three women and two men, and she wondered if that was significant somehow. One of them was the chairman she had seen earlier, but he showed no signs of recognizing her. In fact, his eyes were also now closed, so Susan's best spell for ending this quickly was again denied her.

Cheaters.

Tell that to all the people you've beaten up over the years. You think Severus didn't feel exactly the way you do when you were smashing up his lab after Luna had been given that truth serum?

He had it coming.

So do you.

The warlocks broke formation and encircled her, staying out of easy reach as they did so. She estimated they were about four meters from her. Looking them over she noticed each carried a knife for some reason, gripped tightly and ready to strike.

Susan called out her *Elemental Weapon*, not worried at the moment about the energy loss. She had plenty to spare for *this* combat, at least. She slowly spun in the air, wondering which one would be the first to strike. Obviously she would have the highest *Initiative*, right?

Warlock "four" surprised her, acting first and ripping her cloak off, then tossing it in her direction. Susan easily dodged it, wondering what they were up to. Then warlock "one" did the same thing, but off to the side so she was at a flanking penalty for trying to avoid it. This didn't matter, Susan figured her *Acceleration* would be more than equal to the task of getting out of the way of a *cloak*, and put no energy into her dodge. She rolled quite low in comparison, and was surprised to find the cloak wrapping itself around her head.

I can still tell where they are with Spirit Sense, blinding me doesn't make sense.

They're getting desperate now, or are they really up to something? I'll just tear this off next action.

But Susan's dodges, even at one segment delay, caused warlock "two" the opportunity to strike first, which he did. Susan felt him coming, but had no training in *Blind Fighting*, so just swung her sword and hoped her *Augmented Skill* would compensate. She underestimated her opponent. The Darkness didn't care about these people, it had thousands more just days away. This... was about payback.

The woman didn't dodge, and Susan's blade smashed into her left leg for one hundred damage. Of course it could only take twenty one non-lethal, and had she been standing on the ground she might have been concerned. As it was she was flying, and being controlled by The Darkness in any case. She couldn't have been concerned if she tried.

What she did instead of dodging was drive the dagger into Susan's head, doing an astonishing fifteen damage to her "no unusual effect." Susan couldn't see it, but the woman smirked as she sped past, and Susan was now at a minus five to everything. Normally this would have been enough to kill her instantly, and four more besides. Only having *Avatar* up saved her, as she had twenty extra health.

Susan was in shock. And because of her *Low Pain Tolerance*, in quite a bit of pain. She couldn't ever remember being wounded like this- *never!*

How did they penetrate my armor so easily? Why didn't my Giant's Soul divide the damage? And how does a simple dagger bypass my Invulnerability? This is nuts!

Hey, looks like they found a weapon that can hurt you, gloated The Darkness. Guess their next attack will end it.

Susan felt them move with *Spirit Sense*, two at once this time from the front. She had to do something drastic, but what?

With only an instant to choose between *Burst* and *Phase*, she decided. *If this doesn't work, I can always "reload" from my "save."*

She spent an XP for an extra action, making a *Spirit Manipulation* check, and got a fifteen after accounting for her penalties. Then she made her real action.

"Elemental Burst: Knockout!"

The burst was centered on her, and she knew it would probably hurt, but was the only way to get all of them at once. With twenty four energy thrown in, the radius was thirty meters across and everyone took 5d12 damage fifteen times. In essence, damage was rolled fifteen times and wherever a body location took the most damage, that was kept. Of course, being *Knockout* whatever damage done was doubled.

The warlocks fell out of the sky.

This damage was superficial to Susan, who did divide that all by fourteen, but her entire body was very sore when she hovered near the ground to check on the warlocks. It looked like they were all still alive, but some just barely.

"Susan," someone called, and she sagged a little more. *Am I going to get attacked again?*

But it was just Sparkle, flying over to her. "What happened to you? That blast reached past me, it's a good thing I was still *Phased* from that water attack or I would have been hit too! Who knows who else you hit with it?"

"Sorry," she said wearily. "Had to, might have died otherwise."

"Died? You? Impos- Your face! They got through your armor? Stand still, I'll put *Regeneration* on you."

"Thanks."

Susan waited, the seconds ticking by as her body healed itself with magic, and finally she could pull herself straight and stand on the ground again. She was fearful that this was the best time for an ambush, so if there were any more warlocks in the area she was pretty much helpless if they sprang out now. But none did. Healed enough to move without falling over, Susan drained energy from these warlocks and touched them with the knife to make sure they wouldn't die.

"I still have two more cities to clean out, too," she complained. "Forget getting experience in how to fight though, I'm taking them out from hiding, as quickly as I can. If they can actually hurt me through *Invulnerability...*" She bent to pick up one of the knives that had

fallen and did a *Magic Sense* on it. "Oh, I should have known."

"What?"

"It's one of those knives the wizards swish around instead of wands. Probably the only magical weapon produced in quantity in the world. I should have realized. They weren't just destroying things for the fun of it, they were looking for wizards so they could steal their knives. Let me see if I can find them all, then we'll take these people in."

Susan spent a moment looking around, gathering up all the knives where they had fallen near the knocked out warlocks. That done, she piled their unconscious bodies up and opened a *Teleportal* back to the wizard's building. "Secure these warlocks," she shouted to the first person she saw, who called for help and started hauling them through.

"They've really gone mad?" asked one young wizard, waiting for a turn to go through the portal and help.

"I'm afraid so. Hope you've been studying hard, because today is a surprise quiz."

The boy looked confused. "I'm not even sure what those words mean."

"I mean today your skills will really be tested, and you didn't expect it."

"Oh."

With the prisoners secure, Susan opened a portal to the next large town in Ethshar, and stepped through with Sparkle. She hadn't seen very much of it, just the wizard's street really, which was quite thoroughly on fire.

"Tore this place up pretty good," Sparkle remarked. "Do you hear that?"

"What?"

Sparkle raced off, but didn't go far when she stopped in front of a ruined house that had been demolished. "I think there's someone inside!"

"Great." Susan tossed wood and stone aside, wading into what was left of the structure until she found a trapped boy calling for help. She cracked the beam just by smacking it, then lifted the rest off of him. The boy looked up at her in awe.

"Let me guess, the warlocks went nuts."

He shook himself. "Yeah, my master just got up, blew the place apart, and flew off. From what I could tell other warlocks were fighting them."

"Fighting them? Oh no!" Susan took to the air, scanning the skies around the town and there still seemed to be a warlock or two fighting against others. She came back down. "They did," she said to Sparkle. "You know what that means!"

She nodded. "They got taken all the faster, and then stopped putting up any resistance."

"Are you a warlock?" asked the kid.

"Are you?" Susan shot back.

"I'm an apprentice."

"Oh." She regretted her sharp tone. "Well, find a new line of work."

"I can't! I'm too old!"

"Too- what? Look, warlocky is over. It's done. You keep using it today and you'll wind up like your master. Freaking insane. With a little luck I'll destroy the source by tonight before they kill every living thing on this world. Either way, you'll need to find a new vocation."

"What's vocation?"

"Just don't do any more warlocky, okay? You have a family?"

"Yeah?"

"That didn't sound promising. If you can get back to them, fine, do it. Protect them using *minimal* magic. If you can't, just hide out someplace until this all blows over."

"I can't get to them, not without using my magic. Have you seen what's going on around here? I should help!"

"Help?" Susan stopped short. "At least that I can understand. All right." She tried to think of something he could actually *do*. "Uh, okay, round up all the magic users that are still alive around here, and have them grab any unsmashed wizardry stuff. We're going to need it before this is over. Find someplace fortified and get up whatever defenses they can. We're only going to win against warlocks if we combine our magics and everyone does their part."

The wizard's guild will be along shortly to more directly take charge, so keep that in mind. Got all that?" He nodded. "Then get going, and stay safe."

"I'll be fine!" He started to rise off the ground.

"And no magic! You want to go mad?"

"It's just so *easy* now," he complained. "Fine." He stopped and ran out, heading down the street.

"Come on," she said to Sparkle. "There's about a dozen warlocks over there, and we need to somehow take care of them."

"Any idea as to how?"

"No. It would be so much easier if they weren't flying about. But knock them out and there's every chance they'll crack their heads open when they fall."

"Too bad you don't have *Elemental Creation: Pudding Pit*."

Susan laughed softly. "Yeah, I should have my book work on that one. Or like, *Bouncy Castle*, turns the area up to M range into the humorously inflated version of itself."

"Seriously, what are we going to do?"

"I really don't know. Against that many, and we have to move fast... maybe *Mass Domination*? It's kind of like the *imperius curse* though, not that the laws at home really apply to this situation."

"Aren't they already being controlled? You go up and throw that at them, you might have to beat whatever The Darkness has done. You think you can do that... with a spell you'll be casting from writings?"

"Ah, yes, there is that. And if it doesn't work, I'm up there with a bunch of warlocks who want me dead. But we have to do something!"

"*Grounding*?"

"Only works on one person. But yeah, a spell to make an area where people can't fly, that would have been a nice one to have."

"*Telesummon* from miles away? Do it in the air and they won't crash into anything, and you can take them one at a time."

"Trouble is I don't actually 'know' any of those people. I can't uniquely identify them, and asking for a signed, group photo, probably isn't going to work."

"Then I've got nothing."

"Yeah, me too. The Darkness will throw them at me without regard for their safety, and destroy any that I knock out just to spite me. But I can't just leave and let them destroy this whole town."

"You don't have to convince me. Just think of something!"

So she did, as the seconds ticked by even with her *Acceleration* going. Suddenly she got out her book and excitedly started paging through it.

"Okay, I think I've got a way. It's going to take a few spells, but see what you think of this. You can drop *Flight* and even *Acceleration* from us. Instead give me *Energetic Accumulation*. I'm going to drop enough energy into *Alternate Dimension* that they can't resist even with putting energy into it."

"But that's no-"

"Hear me out. Yes, it says they return to their exact positions, that's true. But what if they couldn't? What if they were all in my *Pocket Dimension*?"

"I guess that would work. But what about them not dying when they hit the ground?"

"That's the best part. The *Dimension* is as I will it. So I just make the ground be a nice, soft, cushiony substance. Your *Pudding Pit* spell gave me the idea. The ground doesn't have to be dirt, after all, just be the same position relative to the ground here. I'll be *Invisible* so they don't spot me. I'll grab them up, then gather energy again for another *Burst*. Drain them after they fall, shove them in the *Pocket*, and end the spell. Easy!"

"Yeah, easy. It just takes, what, five spells?"

"It's better than trying to take them all down individually. What do you think?"

"I guess it could work."

"Of course, now come on, let's get it ready."

So Susan got out a *Spell Paper* with *Invisibility* on it, ready to activate with her *off hand*

when casting *Alternate Dimension*. She couldn't use one of those *spell papers*, because she wanted to pump extra energy into it. Which she did. From her current three hundred and forty seven energy she put in forty, making the range enormous and keeping them from resisting. All the warlocks were surprised to find themselves in a well lit, endless plain of what amounted to the softest mattress ever created. They knew she must be around, but even their warlock sight couldn't penetrate her *Invisibility*, as that needed a *perception check* no matter how you were looking for the person.

Plus she only needed four actions to put in more than fifty energy, which for her worked out to be about six seconds. She released *Elemental Burst* and all eleven of the warlocks dropped.

Of course, they were dropping already. If she hadn't been so hasty, she might have noticed the warlocks being more confused than anything else. The reason they didn't even bother looking for her was that being shoved into the *Alternate Dimension* cut off the influence of The Darkness, so they would have been quite lucid, had she actually spoken to them. But she didn't. She did wonder why there all so low to the ground when her spell went off, but figured they were just coming down to see where she was. She didn't realize that with the warlock energy from The Darkness cut off, they weren't actually warlocks anymore. But none of them died, and that's something, right?

Susan ended the spell after taking their energy and buttoning them up, then reappeared in the city. She didn't stick around, but went to the third major area she had seen in this world and took out the warlocks there using a combination of whacking them, *Alternate Dimension*, and stealth. As the disappearance of a dozen warlocks from one city alerted The Darkness to that tactic, they were more spread out when she reached the next one, forcing her to be similarly creative. It didn't bother her, she was *thrilling* with energy, (or possibly brimming or even fit to bursting) so she had it to throw around.

When she got back to Ethshar of the Spices she went directly to the dungeon area and was horrified to find it empty.

Oh no, they broke out! But wait, the place isn't smashed up...

She ran up the stairs and found someone, and was hastily assured they were now someplace more secure, and Susan followed the wizard she saw into a room where a large tapestry hung.

The scene was of a similar bent to her own *Personal Dimension*, just with more farmhouses rather than just a single cabin. There was a shining sun, a stream, hills in the distance, it was all very nice.

"They're in there," explained the wizard. "Of course, a wizard had to go there to drag their unconscious bodies out of the frame so each one could be passed through, but he volunteered so that was that."

"Where is that? Just moving them won't help. Once they're awake they'll just fly back here!"

The wizard laughed. "No, no, they can't escape from there. This scene isn't in this world at all. The tapestry that's inside leads back to the warlock house, and a chair has been placed in the room it empties out in. Until that chair is moved, they're effectively stuck there, forever. It was made some time ago by a warlock, thinking they could avoid the calling if they went in there. We just dug it out of storage because it didn't work. He came out and immediately flew off. But for our purposes now, it's ideal."

"Oh. Well, I have a bunch to 'deposit,' so I hope they're standing by!"

Susan dumped out two dozen or so warlocks, (she hoped she remembered everybody) (that was a joke) and spent the next few minutes carefully touching them to the tapestry while avoiding touching it herself. She thought she might be able to free herself with something like *Dimension Gate* or at the very least calling Silverstreak and asking to be put back, but why make the effort if she didn't need it?

Finally they were all through, and she went to meet with Ithinia when she returned.

"I think we're safe for the moment," she said. "How goes the preparation for Ethshar's defense?"

"It's been, what, a half an hour? We've hardly reached half the people we'll need to."

"Oh, right. Sorry, being *Accelerated*, especially for as long as I was, really messes with your sense of time."

"It'll take some time. Glad to hear you could take care of the warlocks in other places. We've been bringing any here that weren't yet called, just to be safe. They went through the tapestry too, though most weren't exactly happy about it."

"I can imagine they wouldn't be."

"What's your next move?"

"Not sure, do you have something in mind?"

"I do!" shouted a voice, and Sativola came running up the stairs. "After I started getting practitioners together, I did a quick reading of the future, just in case. You need to look upon the resting place of The Darkness, something important is happening there you need to see. I came back to tell you!"

"Well," said Susan, not one to ignore vague warnings of the future from the nearest thing this world had to ESPers. "Let's see what old sourpuss is up to."

Who says sourpuss anymore?

Don't you sass me, boy, I've got more energy than Pinkie Pie and I will use it.

On the being inside your own soul. Good luck with that.

Grrr.

"Teleportal!"

End of the road in sight?

Place: Wizard's Guild building

Time: A moment later

"Now isn't that interesting?" Susan was looking through the fist sized hole she had created with *Teleportal*, in order to "scry" on the location she last saw The Darkness. She believed she would see a bunch of warlocks and that blobby thing heading away at high speed, or perhaps an empty field they had already left.

Did you just call me "blobby?"

She wasn't sure how fast it could move in atmosphere, or how fast warlocks could fly using their power. It hadn't been all *that* long, so she figured she could at least catch a glimpse of them as she had positioned the gateway high enough, and there were enough of them, so she could easily pick them out. I mean you couldn't mistake thousands of warlocks and a rotund space critter for anything else, could you?

You just did it again! Do you know how cold space is? I have a layer of blubber to keep my body warm in the vacuum.

What she actually saw was quite different.

About fifty warlocks had remained behind and were busy floating huge chunks of rock around to make a sort of fortress that covered the hole she had seen Mr. Too Many Hamburgers floating out of.

That's SIR Too Many Hamburgers to you, missy.

"What do you see?" asked Sparkle. "And don't tell me it's a big empty field and you're going to play it up for dramatic effect and when someone looks through it and says 'it's a big empty field' and you're all like 'I know, who would have thought' or some nonsense like that."

"Please, Sparkle, this is no time for jokes. I just don't know what's gotten into her," she said to Ithinia.

"Just tell us what you see already," she sighed.

"Oh, right. A bunch of them are still there, and they're building a big stone box around the impact site." She watched as another set of walls was being dropped into place around the walls that were already there. "Okay, a big stone box inside a big stone box. Which for all I know is inside an even smaller big stone box. And they're doing something, can't quite see from this angle." She ended that *Teleportal* and made another one lower down. Squinting through the hole she found she still couldn't get a good look at what they were doing, so used *Temporary Tool* to make an old fashioned spyglass and looked through that. "They're carving something on the stone, and it's glowing. Say, did I like, witches and wizards and such get turned into warlocks? Or... demonologists, maybe?"

"They did, why?"

"That's just super. Because I see things that are clearly not warlocks patrolling the area and I bet whatever those symbols are is some kind of warding."

"Let me see," said Sativola, and Susan handed over the tool.

"This is amazing, what sort of magic is this?" she asked, looking through it. "It's like I'm standing right next to them!"

"That's not magic, just lenses."

"Lenses?"

"Ground down glass, one at each end in a certain shape. You have glass, I've seen it."

"Of course we have *glass*," scoffed Ithinia. "Who doesn't know what glass is? Grinding it into shapes though, that sounds like something you should talk to scientists about."

Susan looked over at her incredulously. "You have scientists?"

"Of course. A minor branch of magic, I admit, but perhaps one day it could be useful."

"Hardly!" scoffed Sativola.

Susan shook her head. "You people have no idea what you're talking about. Yes, when this is over, remind me to advance your civilization a thousand years or more by giving some scientists some ideas. Honestly."

"The runes?" asked Ithinia, trying to get the conversation back on topic.

"Oh, right. Yes, they're for protection and readiness. Basically they would alert someone if something got too near, and make the stone harder to destroy."

"Wonderful. I get to worry about all branches of magic, and getting fried by demons, when I go there to face The Darkness. Trying to take just warlocks out without killing them was bad enough. These can throw other spells at me? And if they're witches, they probably knew when I'd arrive before I've even decided I wanted to go!"

"Probably," agreed Sativola. "What are you going to do?"

"Plan and scheme like I have never before. I have to assault them before this wonderful, wonderful energy goes away... in about twenty seven hours."

"And before they erect even more defenses against you, I would think," Ithinia said dryly.

"Sure, that too."

"It doesn't make sense though," protested Sativola, still looking through the hole at various angles. "The creature can make anyone that gets near it into a warlock right? That's why people that investigated on foot never came back."

"Actually," said Ithinia, "that's only speculation. They may not have come back because the thing killed anyone that got too close. But it must have made warlocks in the beginning, how else did we get them? So I guess you're right?"

"So wouldn't the logical course of action be to sweep over the countryside, gathering up new forces? I mean if he can really control people through the warlock power, and I can't believe he's at any sort of limit for the number of people he can control given what you've said he is, Susan, why isn't he? Wouldn't that be easier than destroying us one at a time, even with thirty years of called warlocks to fight for him? We have days before his main force arrives, who knows what defenses wizardry could put up in that time? Why chance it?"

"She has a good point," agreed Sparkle. "I can't believe the creature is unable to move, especially if it normally flies around space. It could have warlocks just carry it around. Why is it there?"

"You make a better point than you know," Susan agreed after a moment. "Why land all the way out in the sticks like that? If The Darkness had smashed into a population center like this one all those years ago, there would be warlocks aplenty right now. The fight would have been over before it even began."

"That would have been a disaster." Ithinia's eyes were wide.

"So we have two choices. Either The Darkness came later, after the creature was here, or there is something about that spot it needs. What's in that area, exactly? Metals? Minerals? What does a space creature eat exactly?"

"Not much mining done in that part of the world, even before the fall. I couldn't really tell you, though."

"The hole wasn't that deep, and it wasn't eating the people that I know of. A creature that size must need something substantial."

Again with the jabs at my size! Maybe I'll find a petite princess somewhere, possess her awhile. Would that satisfy you?

It would, actually. There must be some around here someplace.

Oh, no, I meant on other worlds. This one is mine. Sorry, didn't mean to get your hopes up there.

Jerk.

"What about sunlight?" asked Sparkle. "Is it more like a plant, and it just needs photons hitting it?"

"What are photons?" asked the natives.

"Wait a second," said Susan, holding up a hand. "When I used that power I got *spirit energy*. That energy must have come from somewhere."

"Yeah, the creature."

"Yes, the creature," Susan said, looking down at Sparkle. "But where did it get the energy from? If I'm tuning in to WRLK FM he's acting as a transmitter. The thing in warlock's brains is acting as a receiver. He's transmitting energy along with telekinetic force and instructions I bet. I even have an idea as to how."

Susan closed the *Teleportal* again and opened a new one, to the area her *Plastic Proxy* duplicate had been left by Ithinia. She looked through, making sure no warlocks were in evidence, and stepped through. She shooed the others back and opened up her senses, her *Spirit Senses*. With no other real animal life for miles her fourteen (maximum) result told her all she needed to know. The area here was rich in ley line energy. She nodded her head and stepped back though, closing the hole behind her.

"I bet there's a huge convergence there," she said to Sparkle, who nodded.

"That would stand to reason. And maybe something we can exploit?"

"Like even it only has so much energy to send to warlocks? So it can only effectively control a small group of them?"

"What are you two talking about?" demanded Ithinia.

"Lines of energy that cross the planet," explained Susan. "I can tap into them, but usually I'm on the move and honestly I have so much energy naturally it hardly seems worth it. But I probably should, it would make my magic- anyway. The Darkness landed there to latch onto those energy conduits, and that may be what it's eating. But it's definitely what's providing the warlocks with power. Maybe they're hooking onto lines without even knowing it, and that's why the energy rate between us was so different? The closer to a line you are, the more energy you get? Again, I'd have to do more experiments and that's too risky at this point."

"Wait," said Sativola. "You mean there's energy just flowing about like a river that I could have tapped into at any time? You do remember that witchcraft depends on my body's own energy, right?"

Susan raised her hands in defense. "Like I said, I've got a lot to think about, even I can't consider all things all the time. Plus, they're densest in forested areas, or places with a lot of plant life and life energy in general. Farms, where lots of things are born and grow, that sort of thing. That's why it landed out there, way more plant life, so better *ley lines*. And in thirty years the plant life there must be even greater because there were no humans to cut it, pull weeds, chop wood, etc. Here in a city... well, how many trees do you see walking about?"

"I don't think I've ever seen a walking tree."

"I mean *while* walking about. How many trees, while walking about, have you seen?"

"Oh. Still, it might have been nice to know about."

"Another thing to consider when this crisis is over. If you can even learn to sense and tap them. I got this knowledge and ability from the being that sent me here. If it was possible here, I'm sure you would have already figured it out. The Darkness knows because it's also from outside the world, and it wants all things energy. Because it's a glutton."

I'm not even going to respond anymore. See how you like that. Yup, silent treatment for the win. Starting now. Not going to say another word. Not. One. Word. More.

You mean now?

That's right. Right now.

Except for then?

Right. Starting... now.

"Like we figured out what you showed me?"

"What exactly *did* you show her?" Ithinia asked suspiciously.

"Just witchcraft stuff, nothing for wizards to concern themselves with," sniffed Sativola.

"I see your point, but if there are witchcraft things we can do that we don't know about, why not this energy stuff? Of course if your theory is correct, that makes the warlocks there even more of a danger, because they are so close to these lines."

"You had to go and make it worse, didn't you?"

"I think it already was, I just want to make sure you're prepared."

"I'll never be prepared. Okay, let me see what I can come up with this time, I'll *save* and storm the castle."

"You don't want any of our support?" asked Ithinia. "Wizards and other magic users should be coming along at any moment."

"I've never been comfortable mixing magic. Any spells you cast on me might interfere with ones I have going. Best to stick with what I know. Unless you know of a spell that can make the ground softer, so if I was to knock warlocks out of the sky they wouldn't get as hurt

when they fell.”

“I can ask about that.”

“Please do. What I’m most concerned with is those demons though, I had a hard enough time taking just one down. And who knows what they can do!”

“We could ask a demonologist.”

“We’ll have to. If you think you can stand being on a battlefield, or there are some witches with skill in battle magic, I’ll welcome them as backup.”

Sativola shook her head. “I’m not unique in that regard, no witch would want to fight directly.”

“That figures. Wizardry is too slow, witches can’t fight, Theurgy is no help, I wouldn’t trust demons to fight demons anyway... am I missing anything?”

“Sorcery,” replied Ithina. “There could be talismans that would be useful in a fight. But finding any Sorcerers to go with you and fight warlocks? That’s the tricky part.”

“And you’re still willing to go fight those warlocks?” asked Sativola.

“Who else is there to go? I’ll have to think of something else though, I’m not sure if The Darkness can shut down my magic from where it is, but for all I know it could. I’m going to have to rely on magic cast before I even arrive there.”

“Just *Phase* through the place and run to the center,” suggested Sparkle.

“Oh, that reminds me. What exactly am I going to do once I get there? Am I going to have to kill that space creature?”

“Not necessarily. Remember how you beat Tom. This must be a similar situation, if you enter the soul of that thing maybe you can fight off The Darkness from within.”

“You remember what happened in there! I’m not going to have any understanding of that alien’s mind. I was able to piece Harry back together because I knew him. How am I going to piece back together something that won’t even think like I do?”

“What other choice do you have?”

Susan shook her head. “They’ll both be alien to me. Tom, at least, was human, so I could separate him from The Darkness pretty easily. But yeah, you’re right, I have no other choice. I’ll make a *Spell Paper* with *Soul Projection* in it, and put tons of this energy in.”

“And get out the book, let’s see what we can put on you in case this all goes bad.”

So Susan prepared. She got some parchment from the wizards and made *Spell Papers* with Sparkle’s help. As there was really no limit to the number of *Spell Symbols* one could have active at once, Susan created some for *Acceleration*, *Accelerate Magic* and *Energetic Accumulation*. She also got *Augment STRength*, because why the heck not? This way Sparkle would not have to carry the penalty for all that, and be freed up to fight. Susan also read over *Energy Gift* and pumped her full of energy too.

“I feel all tingly,” she complained at two hundred energy.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be burning it off soon enough.”

She also made several *Magical Ally: Major Spell Papers*, ready to activate as a distraction and to fight demons. Her *Legion* she would call up on site. She debated *Barrier Against Weapons* but figured there couldn’t have been that many wizards there, she could handle a knife or two now that she knew they could hurt her. Sparkle got *Elemental Body: Knockout* so Susan could use her *Burst* without worrying about hitting her, with the added benefit that she was now basically impossible to kill. Susan didn’t get the same because her damage was *far* higher as she was, and that was going to be key if they had to actually fight their way through.

Susan also attached a *Colossus Paper* to Sparkle’s collar, just in case.

During this time, Ithina looked into a ground softening spell, and the promised other types of magic users started arriving. Susan had a brief chat with the demonologists, who said there were many types of demons, and each basically had a specialty.

“Like energy demons, they can drain your energy and leave you helpless.”

“Or wind demons, that are almost too fast to even catch a glimpse of.”

“Or corruption demons, that can make you sick with a touch.”

“Or demons of darkness, that can steal the very light from wherever they are.”

“Or cleanliness demons, that can clean anything with one swipe of their tongues.”

Everyone looked over at him.

“What? They keep my shop clean.”

“But I don’t think that’s really relevant here, do you? Of all types of dangerous demons, I think the ones that eat dirt are pretty low on the list, yes?”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“In other words, expect the worst?” asked Susan. “Because basically, they could probably do just about anything between them.”

“Pretty much,” they agreed.

She sighed.

And finally there were no more checks to make, no more prep to do. Susan had more STRength, magic, and energy than she ever dreamed possible, and she was still very worried about going into battle against these warlocks. She didn’t want to kill any of them, while the demons she didn’t mind sending back where they came from. (Which is what the demonologists said would happen, if they were killed.)

Is it really possible to fight off all of them myself? And I’m going to have to, if that area isn’t secure how can I possibly engage The Darkness in spiritual combat? My body would be totally vulnerable. With luck, I can Phase through the walls and reach it before anyone realizes I’m even there. Ha, maybe I should have gone with Augment Stat: LUCk rather than STRength. Oh well, I can take them!

Wondered where that Overconfident weakness was lately.

Oh, are you back talking to me again? Your so called silent treatment didn’t last long. I’m not stupid you know, and I played a card to keep them alive at the end of the fight.

Still, thinking about creeping around, wondering if you’ll get through. Did that knife to the head shake your confidence, perhaps?

The only thing shaking around here should be you. I’m coming for you, and make no mistake. I’ll kick you off this world just like I did the others.

If you say so. You do realize how much it’s going to suck, being up against a whole army of warlocks?

I once said my powers made me an army. It’s time to see if that statement really was true or not.

And of course you can try again and again if you flub it, thanks to that time spell of yours.

True. Are you going to let me get on with this, or what?

Oh, sorry, are these last few minutes of life really so unimportant you can spend them jiving with me? No words of comfort to your companion, about to follow you into battle? No encouraging word for Sparkle, who is going to try watching your back through all of this?

She’s unkillable now, this planet doesn’t have Knockout magic. And even if it did, I’ll have Magic Domination going, so no other magic but mine will work.

Okay. I hope you’re right.

“Ready?” she asked.

“Ready.”

“Then once again into the breach. *Teleportal.*”

The Ninja Uses His Environment

Time: Seconds later

Place: Near the resting point of The Darkness' body

Susan barreled through the opening she had made in space towards the stone boxes, hoping she had judged the distance correctly. She wanted to be far enough away to activate what she needed to, but not be so far away that the shock of seeing her wore off and the demons and such reacted. Of course, The Darkness would react instantly, but as she cleared the portal she shouted "*Phase*" so nothing the warlocks could do would touch her.

"*For Sacrifices Made!*" she called, as Sparkle started activating her *Magical Ally: Major* spells contained in *Spell Symbol*. Susan's *Legion* appeared, and Susan ran past them shouting and pointing. "Attack anything that doesn't look human around here!" she called, and they looked over at the surprised demons. Not being human they didn't shrug or call into question these orders, simply readied their blades and charged off. Sparkle shouted similar orders to her *Allies*.

Susan's speed was tremendous thanks her to greater STrength, longer stride, and *Acceleration*, but she managed to get her *Allies* going as well, and they leapt into battle with whatever came close.

They'll not serve as much more than a distraction, given what they're up against. But hopefully that's all that will be needed.

At full speed, Susan gave a little wave as she passed a group of warlocks that tried to grab her, and gathered herself for a mighty leap, sure to clear most if not all of the "solid" stone barricades in front of her. Up she went, Sparkle following as best she was able, getting closer and closer to the wall...

That she smashed headlong into with a mighty clatter of metal upon stone, and thwomped into the ground in shock with a mighty crash.

You do know, I know that you know that spell, right?

But... but... Phase!

But... but... greater understanding of magic and energy than you will ever have. The magic here might be minor compared to yours, but used correctly even something as simple as a minor ward can keep you out of where I don't want you. They might not have known such a thing was possible, but I did. A witches' magic did the rest.

So I'll just smash it down!

You'll have to drop Phase to do that.

What? Why? If I can touch a wall, I can smash a wall.

Except the wards strengthen the walls too, and you can't hit them while phased. You would just pass through them and hit the wall behind it. And good luck getting through these walls now.

Fine, I can take it down, smash the ward off, and put it back up again, no problem.

Really? You've got that kind of time? Better watch out.

Better not cry! Better not pout- wait a second... "Ack!"

Susan saw the shadow of the huge block of stone that was coming towards her and whirled. If it had the same rune on it that the walls did, and she had to assume it would, that much stone would crush her like a grape. And if it counted as a "magic weapon" it would do so even through her *Invulnerability*. She *could* use *Transposition* to stick a warlock where she was, but she wanted to keep them all alive. With a sigh she dropped *Phase* and shouted "I punch it!" while she punched it.

What kind of attack name is that?

Susan, with every conceivable bonus to her STrength that could possibly be placed on her by magic now rolled a value off the table in the rules. This left her rolling the maximum she could, then a lesser amount to make up the difference. She ended up doing sixty seven damage to the stone block, a "normal" stone block having the capacity to take thirty damage before it was destroyed. As there are no rules for accounting for the thickness of an object the damage shall be calculated as if this were a creature, so it divided that damage by three. This

is twenty two damage, not enough to shatter it so the remains pushed her back and squashed her against the wall.

"This is another fine mess you've gotten us into," remarked Sparkle, trying to shift around and shove the block a little bit before it pinned her too much to even breathe. Even being made of *Knockout*, and regenerating any damage instantly, she still had to do that.

"Hey, I'm working on it. Don't see you doing anything."

"I thought you had it!"

"I... thought I did too. Guess I should have put energy into it?"

"You didn't?"

"Do you even know what kind of damage I do now? Honestly I thought it would be fine."

"Just get it off!"

"Okay, okay!"

Susan couldn't move because she was pinned against the wall, but she could move her arms about. Enough to cast "*Thrust*" on the block and get a seventeen. (Again, counting the block as four size 0 creatures, thus giving her a penalty of -4 to her planet rating) It went sliding away seven meters, giving her a good look at the demons who were now standing to the side of her.

"Uh, what happened to my fire soldiers?" she asked, looking them over.

One of the demons, a tallish looking man dressed in fine robes and seemingly riding a wave snapped his... snake at her. The many heads of the snake hissed and made biting motions.

"I took care of them," he said disdainfully. "One sweep of water and they burst like so many soap bubbles."

Great, there would have to be a water demon among them.

You do realize-

Oh, shut up, I realize that you know that I know a spell that causes flame soldiers to appear and that water can take them out. I know!

Just asking.

"The other creatures were also easily handled, it's a wonder you bothered to call upon such weak forces at all. I hope you turn out to be more worthy of direct combat with me than your so called army."

Susan looked over the demons arrayed before her. One was even bigger than she was, twice as tall to be exact. It had three heads, six arms, and rather than legs it just had a mass of tentacles writhing beneath it.

The third was hovering, and looked like a giant badger. It seemed eager for combat. As did the four legged creature standing off to the side. The skin of the creature looked like metal, and it had a tail with a spiked ball at the end of it. Behind them were five floating warlocks, several meters back, but Susan thought they were still within range of her *Slash-All*. (Seventeen on *Magic Combat*)

"Consider the question back in Hell," replied Susan. "*Blade.*"

As the sword dropped into Susan's waiting hand the creature swung that odd tail and several spikes shot off, right towards her. They hit, but bounced harmlessly off her armor and Susan got the feeling it wasn't by much, either.

"Pathetic," snarled the badger, "let me show you how it's done." He raised a hand and a lightning bolt shot out, too fast for Susan to even dodge it. Her LUCK saved her, however, as she was still moving from dodging the spikes, her *Passive Dodge* came into play. The creature got a thirteen to hit, and Susan's difficulty to be hit was exactly a thirteen. (Accounting for her current size, of course.) Ties go to the defender, and the wall behind her took ten damage. (Divided by the same three the chuck of rock did, so it was purely superficial.)

"Oh, really?" asked the metallic demon.

"Shut up, it's hard to control *bolts of actual lightning coming out of your hands*. I'm just getting a feel for the angle..."

"Sure, sure, keep telling yourself that."

At this point, a ton of stuff happened at once. Susan tried to strike at the demons with the sword in her right hand, for the moment not seeing the warlocks behind them as her

enemies. Thus, *Slash-All* ignored them. The big thing started forward, three warlocks tried something, the guy standing on water waved his hands dramatically and sent a cascade of water at Susan, and Sparkle sent *Elemental Line: Wind* into the two demons she knew she could hit, those on the ground.

In order, then, Susan got a 36 to hit the demons in the body, more than enough even given that the warlocks were trying to get the sword away from her at the time. Even though three of them were pulling on it with their magic, the second their power touched Susan it began to work on her not as three separate attempts but rather one attempt, bolstered by one for every five added by the other two. This was a total of twenty one, versus her STRength check of seventy seven. She hardly even noticed.

She did notice the wall of water slamming into her, but the result of sixteen on the part of the demon wasn't enough to bypass her *passive dodge* and armor rating. Sparkle, meanwhile, got a twenty nine to hit, and the two ground based demons were smashed with air for even more damage. Three of the four demons vanished, leaving only the huge one who was now clutching his chest and backing away.

Honestly, why do I even try? They didn't even last one attack! Haven't you heard of moderation?

Not really. I have to do massive amounts of damage and guarantee the hit, especially given how many things I'm trying to fight here at once. Damage for magic is usually my rating, which is limited even with the amount of energy I could pour into it. There seems to be no limit to how strong I can be though, so why not end the fight with the thing that has the highest chance? Plus I have to burn off this energy somehow so I threw extra into COOrdination so they couldn't dodge it. I don't dare do too much magic this close to your other self, it'll start getting shut down. So I go with what else I've got, and that means swords.

The Darkness seemed to sigh. *I suppose they were little more than a distraction, just like your Legion. Anything you can mow though, you will, that's why I took warlocks over in the first place. I'll find something you can't just neutralize on one of these worlds, just you wait. Then you'll be mine!*

*You do what you gotta do, man. Can I get back to this now?
Whatever.*

Warlock "three" had a bright idea, *let's do something she can't negate with a check, or even dodge because it's invisible.* To that end, he simply created a vacuum around Susan by yanking all the air away from her. As with the shatra from before she started to suffocate, and wondered what was up with depriving her of air all of a sudden.

You do what works, I do what works.

The flame on her swords went out, not that the extra fire damage was really all that much. She and Sparkle now went, and Susan trusted her companion to take out the big guy, and flew sideways trying to get out of the vacuum. She was faster than his ability to move the air out of the way, and her flames were back. She still wasn't exactly sure what her next move was going to be, she had to get all of them into her "battle dimension" but only these five were near her. The others were carefully staying out of range at the other side of the cube.

Sparkle shot another *Line* at the arm guy, which he tried to dodge, but Sparkle had wrapped it around him, making that impossible. Even as he dodged he went over another part of it, and fell over unconscious. He vanished a second later.

And we come back to the original problem. How to take these guys out without killing them. I have one idea, but how does a grade four spell come to have a fifteen turn casting time? (That's a minute for those of you keeping score at home.) Here goes.

Susan made a *Spirit Manipulation* check, throwing energy into RESolve to hopefully get a better result. She got a thirty four, so that was pretty good.

Sparkle held her action, wondering what Susan was going to do.

Four of the five warlocks seemed to be concentrating on something, so Susan took advantage of it and cast *Autonomous Assistant* instantly, throwing thirty three energy into the spell and casting it a total of six times at once. She couldn't fail, and felt six invisible helpers come into being in front of her. She dropped to below a thousand energy.

"Anything drops out of the sky," she shouted to them, "you catch it without fail and

lower it to the ground.”

She didn't know how, but the invisible forces she had conjured indicated they had understood these orders. Susan took a deep breath, she now had six man sized helpers the warlocks couldn't see to target, and couldn't really be struck in combat anyway. They had physical stats of forty, giving them a speed just above forty, so she was pretty sure they could catch up to six guys falling out of the sky at once. They couldn't fight, but they didn't need to.

Susan looked up to see the Warlocks still concentrating, but it had only been a fraction of a second so she wondered what the heck they were up to. She started to rise into the air to give the helpers time to get under them, but felt something pushing her down.

“Behind!” shouted Sparkle, and Susan turned her head to see ten more warlocks concentrating on her.

Great, I can only attack six at once if I want them to be caught. “Phase!” she cast, throwing in the needed energy.

Not so fast, she felt in her mind, and her spell popped.

Oh, come on! You didn't shut down my Assistants!

Because they aren't going to help you escape, and they give you a penalty to actions as long as they're around. You can have all the penalties you want.

Thank you so very much.

Susan tried an attack, making a STREngth check she couldn't possibly fail, but to her dismay all the warlocks were now exactly out of her range, and they all smiled down at her.

Hey, it's ready!

What's “ready?”

This.

Magma shot out of the ground in four gouts, slamming into Susan from different directions and leaving her no route of escape.

But I can't be harmed by this, she protested, feeling the hot rock around her. *What's the point?*

If I can't harm you, I'll go for the next best thing, of course.

Warlock “4” had been holding for this very occurrence, and yanked the heat out of the stone, instantly solidifying it and locking Susan into place.

Oh.

If she hadn't been immune to fear, she might have started feeling a little bit of it, as she was now totally encased in rock, unable to see or (and she was getting a little miffed about it) breathe.

I can still get out of this!

Good luck with that.

Phase! she cast without words, but again her spell was denied.

No fair, you can't even see me in here!

But they can, and right now they are my eyes.

You'll be sorry.

While she did this, Sparkle cast *Destruction*, and blew an eighty five kilogram chunk of the rock into powder. A good sized chunk to be sure, but not enough to free Susan.

Crap, I can't shut both of you down when you cast at the same time.

Ha ha.

I'll just have to keep her distracted otherwise then, won't I?

Susan heard more rocks crashing about outside her stony prison, and winced knowing their delay was no longer in sync.

She strained, her magically enhanced STREngth and size doing their job and cracking the stone, but she had almost no leverage. Also this stone divided her damage by three, so while it cracked, it didn't crumble.

Sparkle tried *Destruction* again but this time it was negated, and she growled in frustration.

Wait, she did a reactive to dodge something, I heard that much. That means we're only one segment apart!

Susan waited one segment, and The Darkness had to choose between her and

Sparkle for what spell to negate, and chose her.

Susan expected more of the stone to be blown off, perhaps even enough to free her with the damage she had done from inside. Sadly, Sparkle rolled minimum, an eleven, and needed a twelve to get the spell off. She considered using her "success" card but decided against it. Another .2 seconds wouldn't hurt anyone, right?

Both tried again, and this time she succeeded, blowing another eighty five kilograms of stone off Susan's body. She made an *off hand* action to twist and force more stone away from her, and succeeded in freeing her upper body. Rock exploded away from her, and she was now free to chop her legs free of the hardened stone. She took no chances.

"I declare the use of card eight, *extra action*," she said to no one, and card eight vanished from her character sheet. The stone wasn't going anywhere, so she swung with all her might using the real sword in her right hand. That was enough, the stone shattered around her.

"Oh yeah!" she shouted as the swords in her hand relit. "Who's the girl... who's the woman? Huh, that doesn't work quite as well as 'who's the man.' Odd."

"*Thrust!*" cast Sparkle, and Susan wondered for an instant who she was aiming at. She briefly saw the circle under her own feet before The Darkness canceled it out, and figured maybe Sparkle had a good reason for wanting her to move. Technically, even done by an ally it allowed her a chance for a reactive action, and she flew sideways as though she had been hit by the spell.

And a good thing she did, it gave her a bonus to dodging the second burst of lava that shot out of the ground under the direction of the four warlocks. It missed, splashing harmlessly against the already hardened rock Susan had left behind. She and Sparkle took to the air before the warlocks could get another lock on her with their power, and decided it was time to start whittling these forces down somehow.

Warlock "3" and the ones behind her now acted, pinning her in place in the air again. Sparkle touched her, knowing it would do some *Knockout* damage but figuring if she didn't make an "attack" it wouldn't get through the armor in any case.

We should be in sync, I don't need to move to do what I want to do next. Take this, warlocks!

Both cast.

Driving Away The Darkness?

Place: Mid air

Time: Mid battle

Having been given a critical piece of information by The Darkness, Susan and Sparkle now realized that for any spell to succeed, the other one must also cast a spell equally devastating. In this way, at least one would get through and progress would be made. Thus, as Susan and Sparkle took to the air together after breaking free of the hardened lava Susan cast "*Elemental Burst: Knockout!*" while Sparkle cast "*Phase!*" on Susan.

The Darkness figured Susan was more dangerous, and negated her spell, while Sparkle's went through and the physical force keeping Susan from flying vanished.

"Come on," she said, flying towards the Warlocks for her free 1/10 movement that action. With her speed of seventy five that was nearly eight meters, so she was now hovering directly in the middle of them. They tried to scatter, taking their 1/10 movement as they dodged her left handed strike with *Slash-All* going, but none could achieve a dodge of thirty three (she rolled a thirty five, but took one off for maintaining the spell and one for the called shot), so they all got hit in the body. She dropped *Phase* just as the attack "activated" and all of them went down.

They each now made personal LUCk checks not to splatter on the ground as they fell, and all but one was caught by the roving *Autonomous Assistant* spells going on. He took some damage to both arms, so he'll be fine, just fine.

Five down, how many more to go? Still, if we keep this up I don't know what The Darkness can do about it.

And apparently, it didn't know either. If it negated Sparkle's spell then *Phase* didn't go off, but the warlocks got hit with *Elemental Burst*. Susan even started delaying one action between castings to make *Spirit Manipulation* checks, further increasing her damage. That tended to take out whatever warlocks were trying to pin her, making *Phase* unnecessary anyway. She was careful to position the center of the blast so no more than six fell at a time, but shortly half the warlock forces were down and the other half had used her beating them down to get well out of range and spread out from each other.

Don't make me hunt each one down individually. I will you know.

I'll do what I like.

You can't win, you must see that.

"Enough!" shouted all the warlocks. "Do what you're going to do, then. These warlocks will not interfere."

"Oh, like I can trust that!" Susan called back.

"I will remove them, then."

The conscious warlocks suddenly shot into the air, heading straight up and disappearing out of sight. Susan looked around suspiciously, but nothing moved.

"Let's crack those walls before it changes its mind, at least," suggested Sparkle.

"Sounds like a plan. Tell you what though, I'm going to smash the wards first, there's no telling what he's got them programmed to do."

"Wait, I'll take them out with *Destruction*. If any of them explode when they're disturbed, that could be counted as magical damage and go through *Invulnerability*."

"True, he would have figured I would use that spell. There could be ones on the other side, though."

"I can wiggle in and take a look."

"Sounds like a plan."

So Sparkle blew holes in the wall, and Susan put *Darksight* on her, letting her slip through into the space between them to take a look. She blew more holes in the "roof," then let Susan smash it down with her *Crystal Blade*. She then flipped the top off the outer one, which hadn't yet been melted together by the warlocks. They repeated this, smashing one

stone barrier after another, until finally Susan stood before the odd looking creature laying in the hole it had caused by crashing into the ground.

“What kind of DTR does a creature have to have to not die, having fallen from *space*?” she asked, looking it over.

“For all we know, it’s *Invulnerable* itself.”

“Ah, true.”

Susan got out the *Spell Paper* with the *Soul Projection* spell on it, and touched both herself and the creature. “Watch my back.”

“Wait, it’ll just negate it!”

“No, this spell has already been cast, right? I’m just activating it right now. It couldn’t negate it any more than I can undigest a meal three hours later.”

“Thank you for that lovely imagery. Good luck in there.”

“Thanks. Just give me a shove if they come back, that should harmlessly break the spell.”

“Got it.”

“Here goes. *Soul Projection*.”

Susan once again found herself standing in darkness, but to her surprise, a dark shape was before her. She went to cast *Elemental Bolt: Fire* but the figure held up its hands.

“Peace, you’ve won. As always. I was so sure I could work something out to stop you. Even if hurting you directly was impossible, given they weren’t all that magical. I should have kept the rest of the warlocks around, fifty might have been no problem but even you wouldn’t have the energy to take on a couple thousand of them. What wizards were called didn’t have those knives, and I saw inside their minds the guild made them break them if they got warlock powers. You should really talk to them about that whole ‘only one magic thing.’ If only I had more of them, I bet this would have gone differently.”

“Honestly it was the *Assistant* that let me beat them. If I thought they were going to die I don’t know what I would have done. And you couldn’t have gotten close with the knives, not after I knew what they were.”

“Humm, maybe. Oh, yeah, that reminds me.” The Darkness seemed to snap his fingers. “They’re still going to die.”

“What?!”

“Where do you think they are right now?”

Susan froze, she knew exactly where they were. She had seen them zoom straight into the air, and had no illusions that the other warlocks, even as far away as they now where, had done the same. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“They’re nothing to me. Besides, there’s countless more of them in nearby realities. Not as strongly, of course, probability waves being what they are. That’s why I attack only one reality in a branch. The one with the greatest potential falls, the rest fall in short order. So who cares about this lot?”

“I won’t let you destroy this world. Better a few thousand warlocks than the entire population here. I realize now why you let me in here so easily. If I take you out, it’s still my fault they fell so even though you didn’t ‘win’ you still caused me to set aside my morals to stop you.”

“And thus making the next time a little easier, and the time after that easier still. I can wait, Susan, there’s a lot of realities and I’m immortal. Little by little you’ll get worn down, and then one day, without you even realizing it, you’ll be mine. Or you’ll eventually see the futility of your task and give up. Either way is fine with me. Or you’ll die, that would be fine too, if you wanted to take that option. Anyway, that’s not what this particular situation is about. Oh, the other would be nice, I agree, but for now I’ll settle for your attention.”

“You want something from me?”

“In exchange for their lives, you’re going to do something for me.”

“This should be good. You’ve already lumped me into the ‘ant’ category, I just happen to know what’s going on and have access to powerful magic. What the heck can I do for you that you can’t do for yourself?”

The Darkness chuckled. “It’s a few steps, but nothing too difficult. The first is to go

where I direct you for your next world. It's not on your list, but Silverstreak will know it. My... alter ego there can give you the number to tell him. I'm waving to that part of you, by the way."

He waved.

Tell him I said Hi.

Tell him yourself.

Hi!

Susan rolled her eyes. "One world is much like another. Silverstreak said these on the list may be ones Luna landed in, but I realize it's not guaranteed. I'll be happy to kick you off another world. After all, Aerith's world wasn't on the list, and that turned out fine, just fine. I love you, sweet *Materia*." She started stroking her bracelet in a way that left even The Darkness a little uncomfortable. He pressed on.

"You can certainly try, of course. You might find it a bit more difficult than on this one, but again, that's not the point."

"There's more?"

"As I said, there's a few steps. Silverstreak will want to know why you chose this world, how you even knew about. Tell him nothing of your true purpose, only that I mentioned it in passing."

"What is my true purpose?"

"A gemstone is mined there, a very unique gemstone indeed. Those that mine it don't even know what it can do, lacking the supernatural awareness necessary to discover its properties. But I do. Basically, it can hold energy. A chunk of it the size of your head can hold ten thousand energy or more, and you're going to fill one up for me."

"That would take forever!"

"Oh, hardly a year, let's not be melodramatic. I figure forty energy a night, average, before you go to bed, and it should be full in no time. You will then give it to me, and I will draw the energy out of it. Thus will our deal be completed."

"With that much energy you could probably conquer whatever world you were on easily."

"Perhaps. But there's always the chance you would still win afterwards, and it would all be lost. You could put twenty thousand in, draw off ten, and we would be equal again. It's what I would do."

"Yes..." Susan paused. She was still feeling the rush of having ten times her usual energy. To have *ten times that much again?*

"No, I would have to willingly leave that world to have it remain with me when I left, and Silverstreak would slam the door shut behind me. No, I wouldn't risk it, especially after all your hard work gathering all that energy for me."

"So, wait... I give you this chunk of crystal with ten thousand energy, and it's a 'get out of jail free card' for a world? You just leave, no questions asked?"

"Correct. These warlocks and an entire world- saved. Because of your selfless devotion to the task I have set. Of course, you could say no, try and get rid of me the old fashioned way. We could duel here, inside this soul, but good luck dropping *trains* on me like you did with *him*. This being doesn't know what a train is, you see. The most you could count on would be large rocks, I suppose."

"Bet he knows what a star is though." She left the threat hanging and started pacing back and forth, thinking. "See you shrug that off." It seemed a pretty good deal, which is why she was so suspicious of it. The energy would be hers, true, but there was no special link between herself and the energy that she knew of. And even if there was, would ten be any different than ten thousand? And she wouldn't have to hand it over right away, if she ran into a world she was really having trouble with... it could come in handy to have a bargaining chip. "What about this world? It's not, like, made of razors, and the razors are on fire, and they can fly, and all they do is quote Monty Python... badly."

It laughed. "Nothing like that. It would be a challenge for you, I don't dispute that. But doesn't each world have its own special challenge? Silverstreak can give you all the details, he loves hearing himself talk."

"I suppose I have no choice, given I don't want the blood of thousands of people on my hands. Is there any sort of time limit on this deal?"

“No. Like I said, I have time. As long as you present it to me before you retire, I’ll be satisfied.”

“What if I die in the meantime?”

“I’ll have a little party and invite all my friends to join me.”

“You have friends?”

“Susan, I’m hurt. Just because you perceive me as some monster of evil, that doesn’t mean I don’t have friends.”

“Whatever. What happens if I change my mind later? Like I ask Silverstreak about it and he says ‘oh, no, you don’t want to do that for X Y Z reasons.’”

The Darkness shook its head. “Then I would reluctantly be forced to kill a number of innocents, equal to the number of warlocks I now command, on some other world. Really Susan, I thought you were a woman of your word.”

“I haven’t given it yet! I’m just trying to think of every way this could go wrong.”

“But it’s so simple a task! Use your *Energy Gift* spell to give the crystal energy, and keep track of how much. Then give it to me. In exchange, many lives are spared. What’s even to think about?”

“Too many things to list. All right, I’ll get your stupid crystal.”

“Excellent! Then allow me to lower the warlocks to the ground and take my leave.”

“You’ll just leave here too?”

“Oh, I know when I’m beaten. You can have this creature back, though honestly the one it was originally calling for should be here shortly to pick it up. Let’s see now...” The Darkness gestured, and in the air hung various scenes that Susan looked over. One was obviously directly outside, as she could see the remains of the fort getting bigger. Others must have been various locations where warlocks had made it to since leaving here. She made sure to study them, they would probably be very confused once The Darkness let them go.

“And that’s all the groups of them? These scenes are from their eyes?”

It made a show of looking them over. “I think so, it’s hard to tell with all these tiny minds.” She glared at him. “Yes, yes, learn to take a joke, Susan. I wouldn’t not tell if I was going to kill a bunch of people you wanted alive. You wouldn’t suffer, and so there would be no point. Of course, it could still be hilarious, letting you think you saved them all...”

“I’m sure your friends would laugh and laugh and snort whatever beverages they drink right out of their multi-dimensional noses.”

“Oh, you’ve met them!? Or did I tell you the squirting story at some point? Really, I could tell you again if you wanted, it’s just the funniest... no?”

She continued glaring.

“And there we are!” it announced, and Susan saw that all the warlocks were now standing rigidly on the ground. “I suppose you’ll want to go collect them so they don’t starve and such out in the wilderness?”

“You suppose correctly.”

“Fine, fine. Probably be a big effort, moving so many people. Even with your magic, you’ll have to explain things, get them settled, involve the wizard’s guild...”

“What do you care? I thought you were immortal. This rock isn’t going anywhere, is it?”

“Just wanted to be sure you wanted to bother. I could just kill them off, save you the trouble. It’s no bother, really.”

“Just leave.”

“If you’re sure you won’t change your mind. I’ll see you later, then.”

The Darkness shimmered and was gone.

Susan felt the immense mind of the space creature now reasserting itself, and wondered if being here was really the best place to be. Augmented by The Darkness it might have been, it nevertheless had powered all the warlocks in the world, and who knew what abilities it had by itself. Waking up like this, it was just as likely to lash out as be confused, or even apologetic, she had no idea the level of intelligence it possessed.

She tried to send it calming thoughts and what The Darkness said, about whatever it was waiting for being nearby, and broke the connection.

As she opened her eyes she truly knew the battle was over as all her magic vanished, and a bunch of confused looking warlocks were getting up and looking around.

“You won?” asked Sparkle.

“I’ll call it a tie. It left, but I had to agree to get some crystal for it on another world. I’ll explain later.”

“It might be best if we move, something is coming this way.”

“What sort of something?”

Sparkle indicated straight up with a paw, and Susan saw something streaking across the sky straight towards them. She had the warlocks get back as far as they could before it arrived, and to her dismay it was a larger version of the creature she was looking at. Without even trying to communicate with her or ask what was going on, the smaller one lifted out of the ground and both blasted into space, leaving the warlocks standing and gaping at what they had just seen.

The silence stretched, and no one moved or spoke. Susan was struck by how easy it had been to get rid of The Darkness here, and without blowing anything up, even. *There has to be a catch, something about the world it wants me to go or this crystal it wants me to find. Some other property or function, and I’ll have to study it quite closely before I put even a smidgen of energy into it. What’s that?*

Susan turned, and everyone else did to, toward the man who was screaming in terror and pointing at Susan. She looked around, confused, thinking maybe he was pointing at something directly behind her? She turned, but nothing was there.

“What’s his problem?” she asked Sparkle.

“Dunno.”

“It’s her!” the man shouted at last, trying something and almost falling over in the process. He backed away. “That’s the girl that was attacking us a minute ago. I remember that now!”

Others started moving away, also muttering that yes, she did look familiar somehow, maybe they shouldn’t just be standing here? Still others were trying to figure out what exactly they were doing standing around near this hole, and still others were looking over the unconscious warlocks or exclaiming they couldn’t do magic anymore.

Needless to say, it became a panic rather quickly. Those that remembered Susan’s attack tried to flee, but swiftly found they couldn’t fly anymore. They went tripping and stumbling behind what was left of the stone enclosure and Susan let them. She moved instead to the warlocks that had been knocked out and started pressing her knife to their bodies, healing them and waking them up. Then they got into the act and ran screaming from her to join the ones behind the wall.

Susan and Sparkle looked at each other, wondering what to do.

“I’d treat them like a stray cat,” suggested Sparkle. “And not just because I am one.”

“I don’t think I can build a non-lethal trap using the available materials,” Susan remarked, looking around. “What would I use for bait? These people haven’t invented pizza yet, another thing I’m going to have to remedy before I leave.”

“What? No, I mean let them come to you. If you chase after them they’ll just be more scared and run away faster.”

“Oh.”

So Susan plopped down in the grass and waited, and Sparkle’s sensitive ears turned to hear what they were saying.

“She woke up the unconscious ones, she can’t be that bad.”

“Then go out and see what she wants. Maybe she can tell us what we’re all doing here?”

“You go.”

“You’re the one sticking up for her.”

“I’m not sticking up for her, I don’t even know her! I just think based on her actions-”

“She attacked us!”

“What are you people saying? Speak Sardinian would you?”

“What did he say?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did she attack us? I mean she was flying and she swung her sword, that much I recall. But how did we fall, I don’t recall her being close to us.”

“Why was she attacking us? We were building something, right? I just can’t remember what.”

Several people agreed, if the woman had wanted them dead, they probably would have been. But they had no idea how they were still alive.

This went on for a few minutes more until finally they decided she was just sitting there, not making any threatening moves, maybe someone should go out there and talk to her. A witch volunteered, and she was pushed to the front nervously, finally coming to a stop in front of Susan, who was currently pretending to be asleep.

“Um, hello?”

Sorting it All Out

Time: Five second later

Place: Still in the field

“And so I said to her, that’s not a fish, that’s my wife!” Susan suddenly said, pretending to wake up.

“What?” the woman gave a little jump and took a step back.

“Oh, sorry, fell asleep there. Someone finally decided to come see me, huh?”

“Yes... um, what’s going on?”

“Whew boy, where to start. How much do you remember?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I was called as a warlock, and then suddenly I had the desire to do the strangest things, like build walls and you were there, then all of a sudden I was standing here and those things went into the sky and now we’re not warlocks anymore.”

“Yup, that’s exactly what happened. What do you need me for?”

“Uh, what?”

“Look, can you just go tell those people I’m nice? I’ve got a lot of work to do today rescuing your fellow warlocks from various places, and I need to get started. The sun will be going down pretty soon and I’d like to be in a city somewhere, not out in the open for this. Also I’d like to explain this a maximum of one time, to everybody. Not piecemeal to all thousands of you.”

“There’s thousands of us? Where?”

“A day’s flight from here in various directions.”

“We’ll never catch up! Plus none of us can fly anymore...”

“Don’t worry about it, they can’t either. Just tell them I’m not going to attack you anymore now that the space creature is gone.”

“What’s a... you mean that thing we all saw?”

“Exactly. The sooner we get going, the sooner all this can be straightened out.”

“Get going where? I’m still not clear on what happened, even though you say what I vaguely recall is what happened. I can tell you’re telling the truth, and you’re anxious about something, and that your subconscious is trying to tell you something important but you’re too upset to listen to it.”

“Wait, you can tell that?”

“I’ve been a witch most of my life. I look younger than I am because warlocks could do that.”

“Oh. Makes sense. So what about my subconscious?”

“You’re thinking something someone said recently means one thing, but it really means another. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Anyway, tell your fellow warlocks there that I’m going to bring them to another group of them until you’re all together again, and then figure out what our next step is.”

“Okay.”

While she relayed this, and tried to get the ones that spoke other languages to understand, Susan opened a *Teleportal* to the first location she saw inside the space creature’s mental landscape. Peeking through she saw a couple hundred ex-warlocks milling about, totally confused.

Oh boy, it’s going to be a long day. But at least seeing it through the eyes of the warlocks was good enough for the spell.

Susan could hardly disguise the fact that another fifty or so people suddenly poured out of thin air, but at least they were all in the same boat. Confused, keyed up, and looking for answers.

“Spread the word!” she called to the original group as they went past her, looking at the *Teleportal* in wonder. “I’m going to bring the other warlocks here, so just have everybody be patient and I’ll explain everything when everyone’s together. You got all that?”

They all indicated they did, which surprised several of the brighter ones who realized everyone understood her. That was a minor mystery compared to everything else, so they went through and started trying to calm everyone here down. Susan then used *Spell Papers* to open several more *Teleportals* to the other locations. It wasn't that she didn't have the energy, this was a grade ten spell, and so each one put her at a negative four to everything. Even she would be nervous casting a spell at that much of a penalty. She marched through, got the attention of the people on the other side, and herded them through the holes. It took two hours, and the sun was setting as the last few people trickled in, insisting they were the last. Susan took one quick look, scanning about for stragglers with some *Temporary Tool* binoculars and a quick casting of *Question* to ask "Is this all the ex-warlocks." To which she got a yes answer. She closed the portal, then used *Amplify* to great effect as it was a moon spell, so the power of it was doubled.

"I'm sure you're all wondering how you came to be here!" she called, the ones in the front wincing a little at the volume. "I'm going to tell you. After that, if you have questions come up to the front and I'll answer them. First off, you're not warlocks anymore. I figure you probably know that by now, I'm just making it plain. The thing that was calling you has left, so you are once again powerless. Unless you were a witch or something before. Sorry about that. Not about you being a witch before... you know what I mean! You were being controlled by that being, and made to do things against your will. Luckily, I happened along and stopped it before you did the horrible things you no doubt would have. If you can remember any of the horrible things you *wanted* to do, try not to focus on that, those were not your thoughts. I repeat, the creature is gone, never to return. You are safe. Now, from what I've heard many of you have been, ah, missing for almost thirty five years. This is because the creature knew I was coming and wanted to use you against me. So it did something to you, I guess. I don't even know, as it woke up and attacked me when I got near it. The creature wanted me dead, it tried, it failed, I won, end of story. Your homes and family... may be gone. There's nothing I can do about that. What I can do is take you, through one of the holes in the air you have already seen, to one of the major cities of Ethshar. With luck, we can be there and through in less than three hours. What you do after that... is really up to you. I'll be talking to my wizard guild contact in Ethshar of the Spices. She may have some ideas. If you want me to go through first and see what she says, fine.

"Yes, you're uncertain. This may be further in the future than you thought you would ever see, and your old lives are gone. But there are many of you, and if you work together I'm sure you'll all get through this. Now, I'm going to open three holes in the air. The one to my right, this way," she gestured wildly to her right, "is going to go to Ethshar of the Sands. Sands, this way. Behind me will be Ethshar of the Rocks. Then to my left will be Ethshar of the Spices. Sands, Rocks, Spices. Got that? Pass it back if the ones in back can't hear you. Any questions?"

"Who are you?"

"Oh, sorry. I'm Susan. Susan the Wanderer in your language. Your next question is probably how can I do all this? It's complicated. Just accept, for the moment, that I can do a lot of magic you may not have seen before."

"Can you get us our magic back?"

"Ah." Susan considered. She knew that warlocks had their brains modified to be able to do what they could do. Basically turning them into a kind of ESPer that specialized in *Telekinesis*. But they had been sent *Spirit Energy* from The Darkness to power that ability. If she could teach them to hook into *ley lines* themselves, could they do warlocky still without The Darkness being around? "I'll try my best. It may not be exactly the same, and you may be more limited because you will no longer have the creature sending you energy. I will have to test out certain things, and right now my priority is getting you back to civilization. I don't want to spend the night out here, do you?"

There was a general agreement, but many people still wanted to try getting their powers back, as that would let them survive out here.

"But if we take the time now, and I'm wrong, we'll be in worse shape than ever. It's going to take a lot of trial and error, and some training if what I think will bring your powers back even works. Get through now, experiment later."

They grumbled about it, but there really wasn't anything they could do.

"I don't want to go to any place in Ethshar, my home is far to the north of there!" protested a bunch of people, pushing to the front.

"Right now that's all I can offer you. Once there, seek out the wizard's guild, they know something's up, they've been notified. By tomorrow they should have the full story as well. Hopefully they can get you closer to where you want to be. At the very least they can give you some money to hire a ship or something. Just tell them the woman that made the mirror sent you."

There were more questions, but Susan held up a hand and created the three *Teleportals* to where she said she would. "If you don't have questions, start moving through. It's going to be a rough couple of days, I realize that, but keep calm, we'll figure this out, I promise."

It didn't take long for the guilds to realize ex-warlocks were pouring into each city, and Susan was pleased to see they had pulled together to start defending the place had she failed to repel the attack. This cooperation continued as they guided people at least to where they could spend the night, and money was pooled to basically buy out an inn or two for those that had nowhere to go. Sativola finally found Susan, giving her a big hug and saying she was so glad to see her again, and even Ithinia came through and seemed pleased.

"It might have been easier if they had been killed," she quietly remarked, after being told the story of the battle and subsequent "defeat" of The Darkness. "What are we going to do with all these people?"

"Hopefully they can be warlocks again, if I can train a few. I don't know if they'll be as powerful, or if it'll be as convenient, but it's a start. They can train others, and the discipline of warlocky can continue."

"You really think you can?"

"We'll have to see. In theory it should work. Worst comes to worst, move them back out here, rebuild the villages that got destroyed when The Darkness fell, they can all be miserable together."

"Miserable? We have to get the warlocks out of the tapestry! They won't be a danger anymore. Excuse me." She rushed back through, leaving Susan chuckling.

"Something tells me that's going to be one busy lady for the next few days."

Susan stayed several more hours, making sure the *Teleportals* stayed open, and answering what questions she could. Wizards went back and forth between the three cities relaying messages and such, and all exclaimed how convenient this magic was. Susan promised several the formula for the spell in case they could somehow translate it, and several witches also stood and felt around the edges of the magic too.

"You think my being here will spark a revolution of sorts, maybe rekindle an interest in magic?" she asked Sparkle.

"They have said they had better magic before the war. Maybe showing them those stories were probably true, what magic can do, will give them the passion to start really experiment again. And the mirrors will make it safer, so yeah, I could see it."

"Cool."

By the time everyone was through Susan had lost a fair chunk of her energy, and wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep for a while. As the refugees had taken anywhere nearby they could get, she was invited to the guild building for the night, and she accepted. A simple but filling meal later and she was happily asleep.

Until someone was shaking her awake.

"Huh? What? That's not my wife, it's a fish."

"What?"

Susan opened her eyes.

"Oh, you're not dead. Good. There's a bunch of people at our door saying you thought they could be warlocks again. Sort it out."

“Good morning to you too,” Susan testily replied as the wizard left again. “At least she brought me something to eat.”

Twenty minutes later Susan was wandering the halls trying to find the ex-warlocks, only taking two wrong turns and getting completely lost. She finally made it. Waiting for her were six people, four men and two woman, who introduced themselves. Gorsedd, the current chairman, was among them.

“I heard it said you might be able to restore our magic?” he asked hopefully.

“Let’s clear up a few things,” suggested Susan. “First, it’s not magic like wizardry is magic. It was an ability given a select few on the Night of Madness, and the thing that gave it to you allowed you to make more so his army grew. But it’s more supernatural than magic. Maybe you don’t appreciate the distinction, but I can sense both so believe me when I say it’s not magical. It would have been *way* easier if it was, that battle would have taken all of one second.

“Second, you had the might of that space creature behind you before. I don’t know how much of what you could do was taken from it directly, and how much was taken from the creature that took it over versus how much was yours alone. You may be disappointed with your abilities even if I can teach you how to use them again.”

“Trading the calling for a lesser amount of magic... or whatever you want to call it? Sounds like a good trade to me.”

“Fair enough. I can teach you, or at least get you all started. I can’t teach every ex-warlock because I have to leave. If you can pass this technique along, I’ll have your promise that you do. In fact, just a second.” Susan got out her book of magic and looked for a spell in the newer section. “Ah yes, the verbal *Contract, or Binding Word*. A moment, if you please.” Susan read over the spell and cast it, telling them what it was going to do. “I want you to promise, right now, that if successful you will do your best to teach anyone who asks who used to be a warlock, and take apprentices as normal for those that were not. I’m not teaching this to you just so you can hog it for yourselves. You will not hide the fact you have the power, and teach at least someone else this before... oh, say two weeks is up. That seems fair.”

They swore, and Susan was satisfied that if warlocks could come back to the world, they would. “Very well. Let’s head out and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

She opened a *Teleportal* back to the forest where she had felt all those *ley lines* before, and they all stepped through, confused. “The energy the creature was sending you came from invisible conduits of power that encircle the earth. They are strongest here, in places like this, with a lot of plant life. So for now I’ll have you practice here where there are a bunch of them. I’m going to cast a few more spells, specifically, I have a spell that can give you the skill I have in doing something. That something is sensing and drawing power directly from these lines. With luck, that should power your abilities and let you do warlocky again.”

“And if not?” the chairman asked.

“Then there’s nothing else I can do. I’m not sure you’ll even be able to learn these skills, but it’s all I can do for you. It can’t hurt, if you can’t learn them, you can’t learn them. But the power is there, and your body is used to receiving it from the creature, so chances are good you’ll be able to do it.”

“Then what are waiting for?”

“I have to warn you, I’m not great at it myself. Believe it or not, my cat is better at it than I am.”

They all looked down at Sparkle, who waved at them.

“Did that cat-”

“Just wave? Yes. Anyway, I’m not terrible, I’m just saying if this works, you can practice the technique and get better. If you can sense energy better you can find weaker *Ley Lines*. If you can draw more power from them, your warlocky will be stronger. Clear?”

Everyone nodded.

“Great. Let’s get started.”

The spell of *Unlock Potential* took a minute and a half from writings, but there was really no hurry. It was only grade four, and the difficulty wasn’t that much either, so Susan tried giving the chairman *Spirit Manipulation* and *Spirit Sense* at her rating of four. She

hooked into a nearby *line* herself, figuring she may as well take advantage of being a *Spirit Mage* for once. With that done, he looked around, a strange smile on his face. He closed his eyes and peered around the forest, then opened them again. "I can feel you. Even with my eyes closed, I could point right at you."

"Oh, sorry. I've still got a ton of energy from before the battle, it hasn't all gone away yet. That's going to throw your senses way out of whack. Try it again after I move over there."

He did, and he said yes, he could feel the energy of the others there, and gave Susan a rough idea of who had more than the others.

"Seems it worked then. Now, you'll be able to draw upon more of your natural reserves, and from *Ley Lines*. My imparting of the skill should have given you this knowledge instinctively."

"I do feel something like that. And there's a line just here, isn't there? Where you were standing?"

"That's right. Try drawing power from it and lifting that branch over there."

"Seems like that shouldn't be too hard." He went over and stood where the *line* was, then took a second to try out his new skill of drawing from it.

Wonder what he does, as he can't just 'make a check' like I do. I would be fascinated to know exactly what's going on in his brain right now...

The branch rose into the air, to the startled gasps of the ex-warlocks nearby.

"I'm a warlock again," he exclaimed. "I can see again, using the warlock sight. Susan, you've done it!"

"I'm glad that worked."

"As I am. I'm really a warlock again. This is amazing." He turned to them, eyes wide. "And now the world is mine!" He threw back his head and laugh dramatically.

I just screwed up, didn't I?

Moving On To The Next World... Right?

Place: Out in the woods somewhere

Time: Seconds after

The group stared at the man, still dramatically laughing, which quickly changed into a more normal expression of hilarity.

“Wow, the looks on your faces,” he finally said, wiping away a tear. “That was worth it.”

“Are you finished then?” asked Susan dryly.

“Sorry about that. I was just rather pleased to find all was not lost in terms of our abilities.”

“Fair enough. Come on, let’s get you others trained up and I can see what next crisis comes up I need to deal with.”

So Susan repeated the procedure with the other four people, leaving the last man bitter and angry that sheer chance and Susan’s whimsy had denied him the chance to become a warlock again. In reality, the chairman requested it, and the other four tried coaching him through the procedure to make sure they could. Susan thought that was actually an excellent idea, and Sparkle added a few things she had observed, having a slightly higher rating and all. As he practiced, Susan put *Augment Skill* on the chairman and had him repeat the procedure with the stick, then went and dragged a large chunk of rock from the battlefield for him to try lifting. He said with greater skill at *Spirit Manipulation* he had an easier time lifting the branch, and could almost get the rock lifted by himself. All four working together easily lifted it.

“It looks like we’ll have to rediscover what we can and can’t do,” he said, watching the others experiment with setting the branch on fire and making ice and such. “And start mapping where the best *Ley Lines* are to be found.”

Susan agreed with a nod. “This actually brings the ability more in line with other schools of magic, if you look at it that way. It seems magic here, or more accurately now powers here have some tremendous down side to balance them out. Needing to be basically stationary while you perform warlocky seems about right, given what this power put you through before.”

“I agree. It’s not the most convenient thing, but it works.”

“Chairman,” one of the woman said, “do you think the overlord of the city would mind if we started planting trees and things all over?”

“Humm, you did say plant life helps *ley lines* to flourish, didn’t you?” Susan nodded. “I don’t see why not, it’s not like they’re high maintenance or expensive or anything. And increasing the number of *lines* in an area makes warlocks, which the city has somewhat come to depend on, more useful. I think he could be persuaded.”

“We’ll be pretty busy from now on, won’t we?”

“That we will. Training people back up, working out if we can do anything differently now that this power is exclusively our own. Mapping the world for *lines*. Planting and maintaining trees, plus whatever jobs we can do as warlocks so we can keep food on the table. And we owe it all to you, Susan. You’ve freed us from the calling, while giving warlocks a chance to really become respected members of the magical community. Oh, don’t look at me like that, Yseult, you know wizards resented us because our powers came from the calling rather than study. Well, now our powers will come from study as well. I think it’ll make us more accepted in their eyes.”

“You’re probably right,” she reluctantly agreed.

“I feel it! Look, look!” said the other woman. She was lifting a pebble, and everyone grinned at her. “I feel like an apprentice again, if this is all I can lift now!” She laughed.

“We all are,” huffed Gorsedd. “But somehow I don’t find I mind it as much as I otherwise might have. In fact I’m pretty excited about it, actually.”

The others agreed.

That duty fulfilled, Susan took them back to the city so they could start calming down warlocks that came around, and they in fact requested to be sent to the other major areas of Ethshar so it didn't seem like only warlocks near The Spices were benefiting. Susan was happy to comply, and as further crowds of ex-warlocks were led off from the entrance to the wizard guild building by the chairman with promises of lessons for all, she explained what she had done to Ithinia.

"I better put up a sign," she said, thoughtful. "Then I won't have to explain where to go a million times. Wish you had asked first, though."

"Why? Warlocks are useful, and their powers are greatly reduced from what I saw. They won't be zipping around the city, sure, but mending bones? Repairing things? Heck just the act of planting trees will have positive impacts everywhere."

"I don't deny all that. The problem is, you say it's not magic. What if they get it into their heads that maybe a witch with the warlock ability to draw energy from the earth wouldn't be so bad? Or maybe a demonologist figures out some way to use warlock energy to help in summoning demons? If it's not really magic, can the guild really deny them?"

"Why would it? If it's not magic then wizards can just as easily pick it up too, right? Imagine a world where *everybody* was a warlock. No calling, so no danger of disappearing like they used to. And no danger of them taking over, all you have to do is knock somebody out of the *ley line* they're attached to and their power falls away from them. Plus it's more like witchcraft now, there's only so much power one person can pull from a *line* at once. Sure, they could find a convergence somewhere, like the one The Darkness was sitting on, but like it, they would be stuck on that spot!"

"Okay, okay, I get the point. I just would have liked the consideration, that's all."

"We're working on that," put in Sparkle. "Getting Susan to consider other viewpoints apart from her own, I mean."

Susan stuck her tongue out at her.

All that day Susan helped ex-warlocks out as best she could. She performed *Question* magic to find relatives for those displaced the longest in time, or to what they should do now that they were back. Many had been taken on the Night of Madness, so really had no idea they were warlocks, but their old shops and contacts were long gone. Susan suggested the wizard's guild loan them money to reopen places if they wanted, which Ithinia was initially dead set against. Then Susan took her aside and explained the concept of "interest" to her, which changed her tune quite quickly.

Did I just invent the banking industry here?

She did mention they might want to see about becoming full warlocks, despite their protests about being "too old to be an apprentice again."

"That seems to be more cultural than anything else," countered Susan. "Really, you should never stop learning and improving your arts just because you reach a certain age. You have a whole new life waiting for you now, and even if you only study to become a passible warlock, I'm sure it can be of use for your old profession as well. If you give it a chance. Plus, can you really not train for a new profession? You become a baker, then twenty years of baking later you decide you want to be a painter. Are you telling me no painter will train you, for money, for a few hours a week? I mean that seems dumb to me."

Most of the older people looked quite sullen, but again there was nothing else for them, because Susan was right. Standing around whining about it wasn't going to help, and the wizard's guild promised whatever aid they could lend in getting people back on their feet (for a small fee later, of course, Ithinia learned fast). At the end of the day Susan took her shopping down at the market, buying some ingredients and meeting the "scientists" in the city for dinner.

"Why are we here?" asked one of the scientists as Susan took over a bread shop, having them slice and chop and pound dough with the promise of a new dish they could sell to customers.

"I'm showing you that all these ingredients were right under your nose, but you never

combined them in this way. After we eat I'm going to give you some ideas for more things that are under your nose that you never considered. I know wizards here, like Ithinia, consider science to be beneath them. I'm here to tell you entire worlds are built upon nothing but science. I'll give you a nudge, show you the path. It's up to you to do something with it."

Finally the pizza came out of the baker's oven, and Susan closed her eyes, enjoying the first bite. "Now that's magic. Don't be shy, come on, dig in!"

The others agreed this was a fine dish, and Susan gave the bakers some other ideas. Like bagels and offering sandwiches rather than just bread.

Did I just invent Brueggers?

The owners seemed unconvinced that people would want to pay them to make food they could make cheaper at home, but Susan assured them with a wink it would work out.

Wait, did I just invent the obesity epidemic?

That done, Susan went back to a "workshop" where the scientists all crowded around her as she sketched out various ideas for them.

Like using wizardry to create an intense, but controlled flame, and fill a bag with hot air to make it rise off the ground.

Or enchant a propeller with animation spells, allowing planes to take off using the wing design she sketched out.

Or magnets and copper to create electricity with water wheels, rather than just crushing grain or whatever they used them for.

She told them about the relationship between food and chemistry, gravity and physics. She explained about the benefits of the railroad, and the explosive power of gunpowder.

"For too long the disciplines have stood apart, each going their own way. If you really want to advance, to get your civilization back- no even better than before the war, you all have to work together. Share ideas. You have so much potential here because wizardry can replace a lot of the mistakes I know my world made. You don't have to worry about pulling oil out of the ground to make a piston go up and down, you can do that with magic. You don't need to send tons of smoke into the air to move a train from one end of the world to the other, build it along a *ley line* and have warlocks move it. This world has such potential- all you have to do is pick it up!"

Wait, did I just invent steam punk?

"This is all a radical departure from the way things have been done here. Have we really learned the lessons well enough from the last war to not have another?" mused Ithinia. "I wonder."

"But the possibilities!" breathed one of the scientists. "We never dreamed!"

"I know. Well, I'll talk to the guild, and see how far they're willing to go. Some of what Susan has told us about doesn't need wizardry, or at least that would only make it work a little better or easier. Start on that sort of thing if you must. Susan mentioned mistakes their culture made in acquiring this kind of power, let's think carefully through any invention to make sure we don't make similar ones. Too much change, too rapidly, may not be for the best."

"You know your people better than I do," Susan admitted. "I'm just telling you that many things are possible, and not to give up looking for them. I made you those mirrors, right? And I gave Sativola some ideas for witchcraft that she's promised to share. Can I do less for science?"

She gave a low chuckle, shaking her head. "Given what I've seen of you, no, you couldn't. Will you stay the night again? Do you have more miracles to dispense tomorrow?"

"I think that's about all, but I'll happily stay the night. See if there's any clean up left to do in the morning, then be on my way to my next adventure."

Which will be the crystal world, something I'm not looking forward to, given what The Darkness said.

"Very well." She rose. "I bid you all good night."

"Thank you, Susan," said the scientists as she left. "We won't squander what you've given us. I'm not talking about just this," he pointed to the scattered pictures Susan had sketched up. "I'm talking about hope, that one day our science will be looked at on par with

wizardry, rather than laughed at and scorned.”

“Good luck. And never stop dreaming.”

The next morning was much less hectic, word had gotten out and now pretty much everyone knew what had happened with warlocks. Susan even heard reports that many more people were interested in the “magic” now that the threat of being called was gone. Susan felt that was fine, just fine, giving an entire world a new kind of “magic” seemed to fit with her quite well. She made her goodbyes to Sativola, Ithinia, and even went back to see how Illinia was doing, in the Village of Dawn. She was doing fine, and Susan spent half a day there telling stories and news of Ethshar.

Finally she was alone, and triggered her communication program with Silverstreak from the watch.

“Susan,” said an agent formally. “What can I do for you?”

“Ready to come back!” she replied, chipper. “Another world saved, another job well done.”

“Uh?”

“Hum?”

“Humm...”

“Ah?”

“Uhh, just a second.”

“What?”

The agent moved off, and Silverstreak took her place. “Susan?”

“Yeah? What’s going on?”

“You say you want to come back?”

“Yeah, The Darkness is gone. Saw it disappear with my own soul windows, why?”

He looked off to the side, then back again. “My instruments haven’t registered a withdraw event. Are you *sure* you took care of it?”

“Well, yeah. I went into the soul of the creature and... everything...”

“Maybe you better start at the beginning.”

So Susan told of her battle, and how it ended, mentioning she had found it suspicious The Darkness gave up so easily.

“It’s because it didn’t,” explained Silverstreak. “You didn’t kill the host, you let it slip out into someone else. It’s still there.”

“It can do that?” Susan’s blood turned to ice.

“Under certain circumstances, yes. You *must* kill the thing it’s taken over. I mean, yes, it *could* leave if it wanted to, but why would it? I thought you understood.”

Susan shook her head. “No, I’ve never killed it, not myself. The dragon and Sephiroth were group efforts. Others have blown themselves up. I really have to kill whatever it takes over? Why?”

“Killing it forces it out of the world. In order to come back it would have to select a new host and enter it from outside like it did the first time. That’s the only opportunity I have to put the protections in place so it can’t. Very few times have Wanderers actually convinced it to leave a world. I mean I could count them on one hand. If it seemed to give up, it’s because whatever it was doing wasn’t the real plan. It was a ruse, and whatever it’s been doing since then is the real plan.”

“Which we have no idea about, like location or who it even is now. I’ll have to start over.”

The Darkness inside Susan started laughing hysterically. *You really fell for it. My goodness, did you think I couldn’t crush even you with thousands of warlocks? Oh, setting that up was really the right thing to do, I’m so glad I thought of it. You walked right into it, and you’ve given me days of freedom. Oh Susan, you can be really dumb sometimes.*

Shut it!

“Not necessarily. Think. There must be something there it wants. Something it can only do with a couple of days freedom, when you weren’t actively pursuing it.”

"I have no idea what that could be. I have to get back to see the wizards, maybe they'll know?"

"Whatever you have to do. Just be quick about it, The Darkness has a huge lead on you now."

"I know that!" she snapped, starting to cast. "*Teleportal!* I'll be in touch."

"Good luck." The image winked out.

Susan threw herself through the hole, then demanded to know where Ithinia was. Minutes ticked by as she was summoned, and finally came in the room looking concerned.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It tricked me! The Darkness is still here somewhere."

"What?"

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. I thought it was gone. But when I went to leave, the being that sent me here said it was still around. We need to call another meeting, figure out what its actual goal was. There might not be much time!"

"I'll see who's here, but most everyone is gone with the warlock situation. Go to the conference room, I'll be there shortly."

Susan let Sparkle lead her there, and paced, unable to sit still and wait. The taunts of The Darkness rang in her mind, it was having fun gloating. Susan tried to ignore it.

By the way, how did you know it wasn't her?

What?

How did you know I wasn't in her, and you just let her leave?

I guess I didn't. You just want to make me paranoid and start checking everyone and everything, don't you?

It would slow you down a little, and be hilarious, so yeah.

Several wizards rushed in, followed by Ithinia. "This is everyone I could find. What do you need from us?"

"Information. You know this world, why would The Darkness go to all the trouble of taking over warlocks, making like it was going to attack the city, *pretend to leave*, but really stay. Is there something, left over from the war maybe, that can wipe out the world?"

"Seething Death?" asked one wizard.

"But only one wizard knows that spell that we know of," countered another.

"You!" Ithinia pointed to a young wizard that had come with the others. "Run and find where Tobas the Wizard was last seen. If he's acting strangely or doing wizardry, have him stopped at all costs! Detain him and have his athame removed. Not broken, just removed. He's not under arrest, this is just a precaution. You understand?"

"Yes, guildmaster!" said the student, running off.

"Okay, what else? Keep the ideas coming!" demanded Ithinia.

The others looked at each other helplessly.

"The Darkness had a connection to warlocks," Sparkle put in. "And S. said it could only move in certain situations, right? What if it moved along that connection?"

"Maybe there was one warlock that didn't lose their powers?" suggested Susan.

"It's a possibility."

"Vond!" spat Ithinia. "If it's any warlock, it's him."

"Oh no!" The others seemed to recognize that name.

"Who?"

"A warlock, unique in the world. He figured out a different source of power for warlocky. He was ultimately called, so I didn't think of him again. But yeah, that would make sense. I should have asked where he was, with everything else going on it totally slipped my mind!"

"Different source? You mean he figured out *ley lines* by himself or something? Drew power directly rather than being given it by The Darkness?"

"No, it's... oh, why not, you know everything else. It's the Towers of Lumeth. When most warlocks go near them they complain of headaches and getting sick. He did too, but then got the bright idea to draw power from the buzzing in his head like he used to from the whisper. In his case it worked. He united- no he conquered several of the small kingdoms and

created the Empire of Vond. Alone. In like a week. He could have done it in a day, but by all reports he was sort of lazy. He was the most powerful warlock ever known, and now he's the last one left. Of the old warlocks, anyway. It fits."

"But these towers, what part do they play? How can they give him that kind of energy that's compatible with his way of doing warlocky? Are they near where the creature crashed? I mean to draw power from any kind of distance..."

Ithinia put her head in her hands. "They're Talismans. Old Talismans. The oldest, actually. They keep the air of the world pure and they were made by the gods. That's why their power radiates so widely, it has to or our air would turn unbreathable."

All those times suffocating me, you were actually hinting it, weren't you?

Yup, a little taste, just for you. You didn't know about the towers, and I couldn't just tell you outright, of course. I figured no one would mention it, there was no reason to! It was fun dangling it in front of you the whole time, so it wasn't a complete loss.

"He's going to destroy them!" Susan exclaimed, eyes wide. "We have to get out there. NOW!"

Pushed to the Utmost

Time: A moment later

Place: Wizard's Guild building

The wizards looked at each other helplessly. They had two types of travel magic that could get somewhere in a hurry. The tapestry, that took a year to weave, or the flute, that took hours to prepare. A delay of even a moment could cost them everything, sending poisonous fumes rushing across the landscape, killing the world in moments. All had visions of the most powerful warlock crushing the Towers with massive pieces of stone, or flinging them high into space, or just willing it and bursting them apart. One wizard sat down heavily, muttering how it as all over.

"It's not all over!" insisted Susan. "Something made by the gods isn't easy to destroy, is it? And he had to travel there, right?"

"Why?" asked the wizard. "Maybe he's powerful enough now just to bend space and will himself there."

Susan shook her head emphatically. "I don't think so. We would already be dead if that was the case. No, he's on the move, yes, but maybe we can still get there in time. Where are the towers? Is it someplace I've been near?"

"The small kingdoms," said Ithinia quietly. "But you've only been north, and they're far to the south."

"I can get my flying speed up pretty high. If someone can come and point them out to me, keep me on track towards them, we'll leave now."

"Wait," commanded Sparkle. "Has there been anyone around here that's seen these towers?"

The wizards all looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Even if they did... oh, they could use a *Spell Paper* and open the *Teleportal* for us. That's great thinking, Sparkle. I forget other people can use my magic like that."

"Start asking around!" demanded Ithinia. "Go!" The wizards scattered.

Tense moments followed as Susan cursed her magic for not being able to take her someplace she hadn't seen with her own eyes. *I know I want to go to the Towers. There's only one Towers in the world. How hard could be it be to magically take me there?*

Finally one of the wizards rushed back in, and said he found someone who should be along shortly. Sparkle put *Acceleration* on them, as usual, while they waited.

"We should make you a maintaining focus for that spell," remarked Susan. "You use it all the time, and it would only be six XP."

"It would save me the minus two, I'll think about it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Ithinia.

"If he's there, he'll have to die," replied Susan. "I don't like the idea, so don't look at me like that, but apparently that's what must be done. If he's not, you all can come through and start setting up wizardry and anything else we can throw around the thing to protect it. So it depends on what I see when I get there."

An old man tottered up the stairs and came into the room, looking around. "What's all this fuss about? Can't you leave an old man in peace?"

"You've seen the Towers of Lumeth?" Susan demanded to know.

"Many years ago, yes. I toured the world taking in many sights--"

"Yes, that's just great. Look, hold this piece and imagine them in your mind, all right?"

"Paper? What's this? Ithinia, what is this all about?"

"Just do what she says, please."

"Oh very well. You young people, always leaping about, never explaining yourselves. Is showing your elders a little respect so difficult as all that?"

"You have no idea," muttered Susan.

"What was that?"

"I said now that you're holding it, say *Teleportal*, and focus on the Towers. Please, just do it."

"All right, I said I would already, didn't I? What is this world coming to, I don't know. What was that word again? Telenortal?"

"*Teleportal!*"

"No need to shout. *Teleportal*. My goodness!"

There in the air was a view of three towers, two whole, one broken. The unbroken ones were simple gray cylinders, while the broken one looked chopped off at the top. Further detail at this distance was impossible. "He's already broken one," moaned Susan. "Look!"

"No, that's been broken since before I was born. Maybe he isn't... there!" She pointed. In the air near the towers was a floating figure, next to a huge chunk of stone that picked up speed and smashed into the columns. Seconds later they heard the crash, but the stone was pulled back and the towers held.

"We're not too late. I'll let you know if I win. You'll know soon enough if I lose."

"Wait, save first!" reminded Sparkle as she went to step through.

"Oh yeah! Thanks." Susan pulled out a *Spell Paper* and activated it, then stepped through. Sparkle followed.

"Good luck," called Ithinia.

"Thanks. Close it."

"How?" asked the man, trying to find the edge of the thing.

"Just decide you don't need it any more. Get your head out of it first!"

"You mean like-"

The portal closed.

"Let's go, Sparkle. One more battle and this world is finished. He has nowhere to run."

"Just be careful, who knows what other tricks it has up this warlock's sleeves."

"I will. *Blade*."

Susan also activated her redone *Spell Symbols* on the bracelet, *Invulnerability*, *Augment Skill*, *Flight*. *Flight* she had originally cast to be on both herself and Sparkle, so as Susan left the ground, Sparkle followed, pacing her. Vond turned around as she got near and held up a hand.

"That's far enough," he boomed, voice augmented. "I know about your *Slash-All* range, so stay well back if you want this one to live."

This one?

He gestured, and high above several babies were lowered from above a cloud, screaming and crying.

"Hiding behind babies now? That's a new low for you."

"Just a bit of insurance. I didn't know how long it would take you to figure out I wasn't gone."

"Guess you're not getting that crystal full of energy, huh?"

"What do you mean? Did the warlocks die or something? Ex-warlocks, I mean. I lowered them to the ground, I was sure I did! I didn't miss any, did I?"

"No, it's not that."

"Then what's the problem? My bargain was for their lives. Not me leaving the world, because I never said that. I was just leaving that body. I can't help it if you misunderstood, now can I?"

"Guess I should have gotten some tips from demonologists on how to look for holes in contracts, huh?"

"I suppose." Vond pulled out two knives, and gestured to the block of stone still floating in the air next to him. Two small chunks broke off and started floating towards him.

"I don't think they'll reach this far," remarked Susan, pointing to the knives. "And those little pieces of rock won't even pierce my armor. Unless I can come attack you now? Or are you planning on further showing your cowardly nature and just float them about?"

"You can attack all you want, but those babies are now scattered to random clouds. Can you kill me and still catch them, when they fall?"

Susan looked, and yes, the babies were gone. He had used the knives as a distraction, and who knew where they were now? "Better a few babies than the whole planet."

“Good!” Vond seemed impressed. “That’s a big step for you. Are you finally ready to do more than knock people out? To kill, when needed? To sacrifice the few for the greater number?”

“I’m certain I’m fast enough to catch them before they fall.”

“Actually,” Sparkle said to her looking up at the clouds, “leave them to me.”

Susan nodded and she flew off, but Vond went on.

“*Overconfident* to the last. That’s fine. To answer your other question, I’m not going to float these about, I can’t.”

“No?”

“The same property that allows them to chop through your armor makes it impossible for me to manipulate them with warlocky. The wizards would tell you they reject magic, but we know warlocky isn’t magic, now don’t we? They don’t suspect the real reason why.”

“Which is?”

Vond looked at her as if to say “You really think I would tell you?” and jammed the two knives, hilt first, into the stones he had floating there. They stayed floating. “Luckily I can manipulate stone, and the knives can’t do anything about that.” The two floated to the side of him, and two more took their place in his hands.

“How many of those do you have?”

“Enough, I think. They were fairly rare on my journey up here, but a few wizards didn’t mind giving me theirs before I left the main group. Ah well.” He repeated the procedure, then pulled a firth which he held in his hand.

“There. All set for our final battle. Any last words?” Susan shook her head and brought her sword up. “Very well.”

The air around Susan erupted into flames, once again sucking her air away but more importantly in the short term obscuring her vision. She shot left, taking her free movement for this action and clearing the flame, but found as she emerged she no longer had a target, Vond was missing. She saw his floating blades, so she knew he couldn’t have gone far, and the floating chunk of rock was the only thing in range he had to hide behind.

Fine. “Shrink.” Being a rock it couldn’t really resist, and Susan threw enough energy in to get it instantly but rather than turning into a pebble, The Darkness negated the spell.

Aarg, it’s like it doesn’t even make checks against me, it just succeeds.

Frustrating, isn’t it?

Yeah, enough to make me do this.

Susan took her next action, flying through the burning air to just reach the rock with her free action and tried to smash it to pieces. She didn’t expect one of the knives to shoot towards her as she was connecting with the stone, and couldn’t dodge because her action was to attack the rock. Her speed and LUCK saved her, as she received a bonus of one per every five speed, meaning a fourteen, plus one, a fifteen. With her *passive dodge* of fourteen, his roll of twenty three (minus two for doing it as a reactive action) was not enough, and the knife whizzed past her.

She cracked the stone with her blade, doing about a third of the damage she would need to in order to split it apart.

Knew I should have taken more Augment Stat: STR. Oh well.

“Temper, temper!” shouted Vond from behind it. “What did that rock ever do to you?”

“Offended me on so many levels!” she shouted back, raising her sword for another blow. This, however, was a feint. She figured that knife, currently hovering nearby, would probably make another pass when she swung the sword. *And I don’t have my bonus from speed this time...*

So instead of chopping straight down she swung to the side, making a called shot to the rock surrounding the blade that allowed Vond to manipulate it. She didn’t want to smash the knife, some poor wizard was presumably even now lamenting its loss and would like it back. She didn’t figure Vond had killed the owner, that would have made the knife useless because the soul shard powering it would disappear.

Odd, that on my world Tom made Soul Shards to try and gain immortality. These people have to make one just to become wizards and it doesn’t protect them in that way at all. That I know of, anyway.

The blade, as expected, slashed towards her with a sixteen result, but Susan's skill won out with a twenty eight. She did forty eight damage, base, to the rock, and as it was actually smaller than a size zero creature it took more damage than normal. So that rock was smashed apart and the knife fell harmlessly to the ground.

"I see how it is," snarled Vond.

"Come out from behind there if you're so upset about it."

"Pass."

"Okay."

She raised the blade again, wondering if she should give up trying to get at him for the moment. She didn't really want to be near those blades, but isn't it better to disarm your opponent if you can? She decided that was probably the case, and flew towards them instead, aiming for the nearest one. She had to turn her attack into a parry at the last instant, as all three animated suddenly and flew towards her as well. She put energy into COOrdination and took a minus three penalty to knock them all away in one sweep of her sword. (It's huge, remember, Cloud gave it to her, and it could basically be used as a shield in this instance)

She managed it.

"Hey, time out!" she called. "You're already holding up the rock, all those babies, and yourself. How you can animate three knives as well?"

"I controlled thousands of warlocks at the same time," Vond scoffed. "You think I can't multitask to this extent?"

"Oh, right."

Great, so if I try to take one out, the other two slam into me. Am I going to have to risk it?

The flames were gone, so Susan chose to speed back away from the rock, put a little distance between them and maybe spread the knives out a bit more. They followed, spreading out as she intended. She realized her mistake as soon as she completed her free movement. They were now in front and to either side, making it even harder to dodge or keep track of them because now she was being flanked by at least one. *I wonder if Slash-All will even work on nonliving targets? Maybe?* She didn't want to take the time to activate it, she knew the knives would attack as she did. So she kept moving backwards, taking a few segments to move and sped away from the towers. The knives slowed and hung in the air, probably at the range of Vond's power.

At that point, Sparkle (remember her) reached the first baby (remember them) and started casting *Phase* on herself while she touched the child. She knew this would break Vond's hold and the tiny human would begin to fall. But she had a plan, and even figured it had a decent chance of working. *Because if it doesn't, Susan is going to be pretty bummed out. She did save though, and we can go back to make another plan now that we know.*

Susan also cast *Phase*, on herself. *I'll just speed through the rock, pop out swinging, and when I'm about to hit him I'll release Phase and that will be that. Easy!*

She took the full time so she didn't have to put as much energy in, and flew forwards again. Vond was now fifteen meters away, meaning it would take her two segments to get there. When she was half way there the knives moved to intercept, and she was torn between wanting to avoid them completely or take more caution in case they could negate *Phase* as well. She trusted her speed and LUCK, deciding to bust through and not worry about it.

This proved to be a mistake.

The random hit location table indicated head and seven damage, making Susan cry out as a knife once again raked across her "no unusual effect." She shot to the side away from the other knife and again, all three stopped and waited like angry humming birds.

Sparkle finished casting, and as predicted, the baby started plummeting to the ground. Sparkle was totally off on her estimate as to how high they were, but that didn't matter so much. She paced the child for one segment, then cast *Entangle* as the child neared the ground. As she hoped, plant life sprang from the ground and wrapped around the kid, cushioning the fall. *Now I just have to do that three more times,* she thought, looking upwards.

Fun.

Susan moved out of range again, dropping *Phase* and wondering what went wrong. *Are Vond or The Darkness spending XP against me or something? I could have sworn my difficulty to be hit there was a twenty nine, and he can't be that good with a blade, especially from this distance. I have to take those daggers out. I wonder.*

"Retrieval!"

Susan hoped that by casting the spell from this range, Vond couldn't negate it, but countering a spell can be performed on the target of the spell, and she felt her magical energies disrupted.

Oh, but wait, there's more!

Susan tried again, this time throwing maximum energy in and taking the five segments to cast. She was going to cast on all three blades, but a REASON check (at a minus two for being rushed) of ten total made her decide to cast on the *rocks* instead. *After all, if they negate magic or whatever, they'll resist my magic too.*

Vond could only counter one of the simultaneous spells she cast, and another two daggers dropped away. She was about to drop the two rocks that were now in her hand with a smirk, but then got another clever idea.

I can certainly handle one knife, Susan thought. *I think these might come in useful for saving those babies.*

Susan sped towards Vond, keeping the remaining dagger in sight as she did so. For this she needed to be closer, and was counting on him to protect that last line of defense rather than the kids. She tossed the rocks down as she got close, and saw the dagger wasn't fast enough to intercept her coming from the side as she was. It seemed Vond wanted to keep the last mobile weapon between the rock and herself so she couldn't smash it again, which was fine, that wasn't her target. She made a *Spirit Sense* check on the move, getting minimum because that's how the universe works. Sparkle somehow knew her plan despite no communication between them, and spent her card 7, *Success*, so that action succeeded. Susan now knew where all three babies were from the position of the weak energy signatures in the sky. She cast again, but *Transposition* this time, meaning to switch a baby with a rock, a baby with a rock, her sword with a baby, and Vond with the stone wrapped around the knife.

This one, of course, Vond negated, as she planned. But the others, with energy and Susan's bonus from *Acceleration*, all went flawlessly with a total check result of eighteen. Two babies appeared where the rocks were on the ground, while the rocks now started to fall. Her sword became the third child, which she grabbed and cradled in her arm. This left her sword hanging in midair, but she put her hand out and willed it to her, trusting the *Material Link* spell to guide it back to her waiting hand.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" called Vond.

"Pretty much," replied Susan.

"You think now you can attack me with impunity, because my hostages are gone. Fine. I'm through playing around with you. Know despair and weep, this is what I'm going to do to you the next time we meet."

And Vond rose from behind the stone, and looked directly at the child in Susan's arms.

With a cold certainty, Susan knew what he was going to do.

He was going to kill the child, knowing she was helpless to prevent it.

"I declare card forty two, *WTF!*" called Susan. *Please, let this work to allow me to save this kid!*

"I declare card thirty three, *Lucky Break!*" called Sparkle, again knowing the exact right thing to do despite being some distance away at the time.

Susan's *Mimic Materia* started to glow, and Susan realized she had a chance. The cards had made this possible, and even as power lashed out to try and tear the child apart in her arms, Susan sent that same power back at him by shouting "*Mimic!*" Time slowed even

further than Susan was used to under *Acceleration*, and she watched in horror as Vond's features contorted as agony tore through him. The attack, with all Vond's might now struck him a split second before it could fully impact the child, and there was nothing he could do about it.

A second later it was over. The child hardly felt anything, now looking up at Susan with wonder, as the pieces of Vond the warlock rained down upon the ground near the towers.

All was still, as if even the babies on the ground knew what had happened, and were silently judging Susan's actions.

In the new stillness her watch beeped.

"Susan? Susan, are you there? I just registered a withdraw event and the barrier around that world is now *active*. Nicely done, you did it! Susan? Susan, are you hurt? I'm looking at your vitals here and you don't seem to be. Do you need me to open the gateway for some other reason? I can have a medical team there in seconds.

...

...

Susan?"

Putting it Behind You

Time: Twenty minutes later

Place: Wizard's Guild building

Susan had finally answered Silverstreak, saying she was fine, and she would need some time yet before opening the portal back. He said to take all the time she needed, and she set about making sure the babies were all right.

"And you used *Entangle* to catch one?" she asked, amazed.

"It's all I could think of. I don't have *Telekinesis* and anything else is just attack related. This seemed the best bet, I saw how dense the plant life that spell makes."

"It worked, that's all that matters. Well done."

"Thanks."

With the babies safe, Susan went and picked up the knives, then made her way back to the wizards who were nervously pacing the room she had left.

"Where did you get all those babies?" Ithinia asked, startled.

"Didn't think I was gone that long, huh?" she tried to joke, but the shock of seeing Vond tear himself apart (as she insisted on categorizing the event) made her shaky and pale. "I always wanted a big family."

The other wizards rushed to help her, and she put down the knives as they were fussed over.

"But seriously, Vond had them hostage. One of them almost didn't make it."

"What do you mean?"

So Susan told how she had rescued the kids, and the wizards shared a look. "I knew Vond was dangerous," said one, "but not that dangerous."

"He wasn't in control," insisted Susan. "Baby killing is all The Darkness, I assure you."

"So he's dead, then?"

"Quite. Your world is safe."

"You're sure? This Darkness creature isn't still lurking around?"

Susan shook her head. "S. says he's gone, and I can leave at any time. I just needed to come back here and make sure these little angels were taken care of. And these, of course."

"Stolen from wizards?"

"Stolen from wizards. I can use *Question* to figure out where they all belong, babies and knives both."

Ithinia grabbed her hand as she started to make the MANipulation check needed to pull her book of spells from the sub-space pocket. "It's okay," she said gently. "I'll get a Theurgist to ask the gods, you've done more than enough for us. I give you my word, all these children will be back with their parents by the time the sun sets."

Susan drew a deep breath. "Thank you."

"I'm... sorry you had to see what you did. It's obviously shaken you."

"Shaken, not stirred."

"Uh?"

"Sorry, bad joke. It's not just that, Vond united a bunch of the small kingdoms you said, I doubt that happened without bloodshed. So he probably wasn't the nicest guy. It's The Darkness. I think it's getting a bit worried, or a bit angry, or both, to do something like that. I'm just worried about the next time I meet him. Will he just do something like that straight off? Just to spite me? I mean can a being like that even know about holding a grudge? There's just so much I don't know about my opponent, short of it wanting to destroy the world with the least amount of effort possible."

"I can't help you there."

"I know. I'm just going to have to take it as it comes, I guess. Look, I should go. You have more important things to be doing right now."

"I have people for that, stay as long as you like." She gave a thin smile.

"Thanks, but I think leaving is probably the best thing now. Use what I've given you wisely, okay?"

"Okay. And thanks again, for everything."

"It's what I do. Come on, Sparkle, we're heading back."

"Right boss."

And so Susan returned to the Hub, where Silverstreak didn't ask why she wanted to be alone for a few hours. He just said to come find him whenever she was ready, and opened the door to the room she used when staying there. She flopped down on the bed, unsure what she should really be feeling. Pity? Despair? Revulsion? She knew she needed to kill Vond, and The Darkness knew she knew. Before it had killed itself in frustration, or somewhat by accident, but now it was going to avoid that because it knew how deeply it affected her.

Want to talk about it?

With you? Uh, no, I don't think so. By the way, how did that warlock plan work out for you? Huh? Not so great in the end.

You don't have to rub it in. Good thing you had those cards though, what would you have done if you hadn't had those exact two?

Loaded the save and gone after the babies before Vond even knew I was there. Attached helium balloons to them or something.

I... would that even work?

I don't know. I would have done something.

No doubt. Still, you know you can't take me by surprise, right? As soon as I knew you were near the babies plan- anyway, all the past now. Don't worry so much. Your next world will feature robots, predominantly. I've taken over an AI, and I'm building millions of killer robots to wipe out organic life on the planet.

Seriously?

Really! I figure that's way easier than flesh beings, so I thought I would give it a try. Plus it saves me some energy, I can just program them to do whatever I want, and I don't have to micromanage them. But enough about my problems. You can now truthfully tell Silverstreak I mentioned it to you. And it ties in nicely about wanting to beat up something not alive for a change. Sure, Luna is nowhere near there, but you deserve a break, right?

I was going anyway, you didn't need to tell me that. I'll keep my promise to you. If it's even true about the robots.

Oh, but I did. You think he can't tell if you're lying? Ha! Silly Susan, you don't even have Deception at more than a one. This makes it nice and legit.

I'm not saying thank you, or anything.

Suit yourself.

Susan spent the rest of the day restless, then got a good night's rest and went looking for Silverstreak in the morning.

"Hey Susan, are you feeling better this morning?"

"A little, I guess. Do you want my report on the last world?"

"Sure thing, if you think it'll help you to talk about it."

So she repeated the story, adding in the beginning bits about helping the world out, which as she told him started to get the sense that maybe she shouldn't go around polluting worlds with knowledge from other worlds. He laughed it off when he sensed her hesitating and asked about it.

"Don't worry about it. You wouldn't believe the stuff that naturally falls through the cracks and ends up different places. And tech stuff, well, they would have thought of it eventually. As far as warlocks, hey, you were just giving them a little power back, nothing wrong with that. I mean sure, don't leave schematics for a nuke on a completely magical world, but improving quality of life? Telling them about *hot air balloons*?" He laughed again. "Don't even worry about that! After all, some version of that world parallel to that one already has them. I mean I presume, I don't know every minor reality by heart, but it stands to reason something that minor would show up near there sooner or later."

“Oh. Whew, thanks.”

“As far as Vond, well, that’s somewhat my fault. I should have made it more clear to you, given you a little more time to get used to the idea. So I’m sorry about that, I didn’t mean for you to take it so hard.”

“I think that’s the first person I really killed, who stayed dead, anyway...” She remembered shooting Tom, but he was fine after that, so it really didn’t count.

“What you do isn’t easy, from the moment you step into a world to the moment you step out. You risk everything, because you never know what weird powers or tech you might run into. Plus with Darkvoid mucking the picture up, and needing to kill him... that’s why I usually send groups. They can support each other. If you want someone else to look for Luna, and leave this behind, I’ll understand. I’ll assign another team-”

“No,” Susan cut in. “I know the stakes, and running now would shame my father so much he would burn his gaudy purple robe and disown me. I didn’t start this, but if killing the host is what needs to be done... I’m prepared to do that.” *I hope.*

“Okay. If you change your mind...” He let that hang in the air a moment. “Now, I assume you’ll want to spend your XP, so you know where the training room are, right?”

“Actually, if you have a minute, I’d like to talk to you about something, sort of related to all this.”

“Oh?”

“The... Darkvoid mentioned to me a world where he’s taken over a bunch of robots? I thought, maybe I should kind of ease into this whole ‘killing the host’ thing. I mean I doubt it’ll get any easier, but if I could take a little break from killing people and just smash up a bunch of machines, could be somewhat... cathartic.”

“It did, did it? What’s the number, there’s lots of worlds with robots running around.” Susan rattled off the number The Darkness told her to say. “I was afraid of that. You *really* don’t want to go there.”

“Oh?”

“Really. Come on, I’ll show you.” He took her back up to the control room and sat down, accessing the computers and bringing up an image of a patchwork world. “This is the world you want to go to.”

“Looks messed up. What happened to it?”

“We aren’t exactly sure,” he replied sadly. “What we do know is that multiple dimensions have clashed together there for some reason. To use my earlier tree analogy, it’s as if many leaves smashed together and made one leaf that had the characteristics of all of them. And the worst part? It’s still going on. One day you might visit an area that had a mountain, the next day, mountain gone- lake there instead. Or a small village just appears out of nowhere, or a section of city is replaced by lava, the missing people never to be seen again. It’s not pretty.”

“So you’re worried that could happen and carry off whoever you send?”

“Not exactly. There’s enough warning, usually, as lightning and other energies are released on the spot. No, the trouble is magic, and why I wouldn’t recommend you going there. You, especially and specifically.”

“Is magic messed up too?”

“To be honest, there isn’t much. That branch is mostly technology based, which wouldn’t be much of a problem for you normally, because you’re *Natural* not *Scholar*. The problem is, and I think you’ve experienced this, right, is dimensional warping. You may be in a section of the world that doesn’t have a ‘connection’ so to speak with any of the planets!”

Susan’s face fell. “And so my magic would be useless, I couldn’t cast anything. Like I couldn’t cast Pluto spells with Louise.”

“Exactly. There are only rare times when the dimensional energies that shroud the planet would open up enough to give you access to all your planets. Heck, planes can’t even fly very high it’s so bad. They get ripped apart by the stresses.”

“So you want a team to go there that doesn’t rely on magic at all, right?”

“That would be best. But most have one spell caster, of one type or another, just because I like diverse groups. You have diverse magic, so it works out.”

“And me,” reminded Sparkle.

“And you.”

“What about my *Imbued* items? I mean if there’s no magic, there’s none to use against me, right? Couldn’t I get along with just my items?”

“I suppose... You’re really dead set on going, aren’t you?”

“It sounds like a real challenge, and someone has to clean it out, right?” Susan was actually a little excited, it *would* be a challenge. First to find The Darkness, and get this crystal it wanted, all with very little magic.

“You don’t have to prove yourself, Susan. I know how good you are, and you saved that world even if you did have to kill Vond.”

“Maybe I don’t have to prove myself to you...”

“I see.” He tapped a finger on his chin thoughtfully. “There is a way. It’s not the most convenient method, but it would work in a pinch. Come with me to the lab.”

She followed him through the door that again closed and opened immediately, and everyone greeted Silverstreak as he walked through. He started rummaging around and seemed pleased when he pulled a strange looking cube off a shelf full of weird looking devices.

“We’ll need two though,” he remarked, looking the shelf over. “There must be another one around here... Ah!” He found another, then went to a bench and started fiddling with them, popping open a panel on the top of each and fitting them together into one larger device. “Now, you have a backpack or something? You’ll have to carry it with you everywhere.”

“But what is it?”

“Dimensional stabilizer. This will punch a hole through any interference and allow you to use... one planet. Each.”

Susan and Sparkle traded a look. “I guess that’s more than nothing?”

“All I can offer you. Unless you want to lug twenty of these suckers around. No? Didn’t think so. And even then, it’s not the most reliable thing in the worlds. It’s like GPS, it takes a minute or two to lock on, and if you want to change it’ll take time to switch. If it even can, really high interference areas exist, and even this can only do so much. But if you’re dead set on going, I’ll lend it to you. Along with some advice.”

“I’ll take what I can get. I need to do this.” *For various reasons.*

“Okay. Do you have a backpack?”

“I think so, bumping around my *Dimensions* somewhere.”

“Fine. I’ll attune it to the watch before you go, so you can control it through there. Oh, and if you both use the same planet it’ll lock on twice as fast. I can give you the full manual later.”

“I’ll look it over. What’s the advice?”

“Focus on the *Spirit* part of *Spirit Mage* before you leave. Take points from your planets if you must, you can always put them back afterwards. In a world where you can’t rely on magic, you’re going to have to rely on the skills having a ten in *Spirit Manipulation* will get you. Oh, and keep your *pistol* skill, at least at some rating, it should come in handy.”

“That all sounds reasonable. Looks like I better hit the gym, rather than the wizard’s area.”

Silverstreak answered with a nod, and dropped the now completed device into her waiting hands. “Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

So by taking *Inscribing* down to a one from a three and spending all her XP, she was able to get her skill group that included *Spirit Manipulation* to a seven rating. Dropping all her school skills, like *Herbology* to a one got her enough to bring them to an eight. She forgot how to cast *Alleviation* as she planned, getting ten back, and also *Magic Immunity*, again, for nine. She transferred all of her stuff from her *Pocket Dimension* to her now expanded sub-space pocket, as her rating increased in that she was able to store larger things and it was faster, with no energy cost, so that gave her another six. Taking one magical skill group to a five from a six netted her quite a bit, and she pulled a little from *riding* to finally bring that up to a ten.

With that done she put some points into skills like *Spirit Step* and *Aura Reading*, but

only a couple at that point so she didn't drain her magical skills too much. Most everything in that category of skills was based on RESolve anyway, so even a low rating was more than enough to get a good result. (With a little energy thrown in, of course) And she could easily raise them while she was there, if she got a bit of time.

Sparkle also shuffled a few things around, losing *Armor of Magic* and *Elemental Line: Ether*. She broke her *Spirit Mage Skill Group*, deciding that she probably didn't need to be better than average at things like *Dimension Sense* and *Spirit Sense* if Susan was going have tens in them anyway. She got her *Spirit Manipulation* up to a ten which let her get a few of the spirit skills as well, specifically *Spirit Step*, *Aura Reading*, and *Spirit Aura*.

It doesn't really make sense, spending all that XP to get so few skills. Spirit Step just seems so useful, but Manipulation, for someone like me, just doesn't seem worth it. I don't have Susan's energy, after all. If I spent my maximum it would be gone in two actions!

While Susan was off doing things, she spoke to Silverstreak about it, who said if she saved up some XP, he could get her a background that increased her energy totals.

"It's expensive," he cautioned, "so make sure it's worth it before you decide. You can't exactly take a background back."

"Got it. Anything else useful I could start to learn now that it is a ten?"

He considered. "I suppose there is one thing. Never thought I would be teaching it to a cat though."

"What's that?"

"It's a martial art. It's called Ryūdō."

"A what? How can a cat learn a martial art?"

He laughed. "Like I said, it sounds weird but it's actually prefect for you. Purr-fect? I kill me!"

Sparkle rolled her eyes.

"Sorry. Ahem, this one is different. Basically you shove energy into someone as you tap them, like so." He tapped her. "The more energy you put in, the greater your potential damage. So it doesn't depend on strength, and you do, what, 1d2 damage if you actually tried to scratch someone?"

"True, any more damage would be better than that. But like everything else we do, if we roll poorly our effort is wasted."

He shrugged. "Can't do anything about that."

"I get it. I suppose I could at least get it to a low rating, try it out. If it works out I could get that energy related background and make it worthwhile."

He nodded. "You would have to. Go down to the gym, ask someone to show it to you."

"I will. Thanks."

Silverstreak also took that opportunity to attach a small gizmo to her collar, in the shape of a sphere.

"What's this?"

"The targeting point for the dimensional stabilizer. Susan doesn't need one, the watch can be used and she'll have it with her most of the time anyway. But you'll need one, so here it is."

"Oh. How does it work? Some kind of radio signal or something? I ask just to make sure I know what can block it."

"Block it? My technology? Ha! No, it's a micro-wormhole, basically a shortcut through space. You can't block it, short of her coming back here and leaving you behind."

"Got it. Thanks."

Finally she dropped the ratings on a few of the planets she hardly ever used and had Susan make her a *Maintaining Focus for Acceleration*, not that she believed she would use it on the next world. It was just a little clip that went around her collar, basically just a band of metal you would hardly notice if you didn't know to look for it.

Accomplishing all that took some time, but Susan didn't feel rushed given how slow

time ran here in relation to pretty much everywhere else. She also got a tutorial on how to use the dimensional stabilizer, which amounted to tapping an icon on the watch and telling it what planet she wanted to use for herself and Sparkle. It could also display how long until it locked in, and if there was a stable channel for more than one planet where she currently was. When she was finally ready she told Silverstreak and he gave her one final warning.

"This gateway is going to be pretty unstable, because of all the dimensional warpage there," he explained. "So prepare yourself. Usually I can get it pretty close to where the action is going to be, but I can't say where you're going to end up. The world has a very diverse set of people, living the spectrum from horses and stone clubs to higher technology than your world enjoyed. Find out what caused this phenomenon if you can, but remember your goal is the AI. If Darkvoid is even telling you the truth. If we can fix the worlds, bring them apart again, that would be great. So keep that in mind as just a secondary objective.

"I should also mention a couple of others difficulties. Your skill in *Dimensional Sense* is going to be useless there, first of all. Mainly because nothing belongs in that mishmash of dimensions, so everything will set it off. Don't trust it. Rely more on the behavior of whatever you meet than your feelings of them. Though *Aura Reading* should be helpful, now that I think about it. Anyway, something is trying to destroy the world? That's probably your guy. Second, your link back here will be sketchy at best. We probably won't be able to talk, if you signal me I'll just figure you want the portal open. I'll monitor the place as best I can for Darkvoid leaving though. I'll figure you'll want it opened soon after. If you do come back here, don't figure you'll be returned to the same spot, either."

"Got it. Wish me luck."

"Or in your case, a good LUCk check, amiright?" Both chuckled, and Silverstreak activated the portal to step through. Susan put her hand through, but the portal resisted and the machinery started whining in protest.

"Just push through it," Silverstreak shouted. "This is the most stable portal I can get you!" Energy crackled around the edges, and Susan felt a tingle as she tried to get through it.

"Okay! Come on, Sparkle!"

Both pushed through, Susan closing her eyes and forcing her way through, where she was thrown through the other side and impacted something hard before thudding to the ground. Her head was spinning, ears ringing, and for several moments she just lay there, trying to clear her vision. Finally she decided she better sit up, and looked around.

She was in a forested area, seemingly alone, as Sparkle was nowhere to be found.

"Sparkle?" she called softly. "You make it through?"

Nothing answered.

"Sparkle!" she called, louder. "Where are you? Sparkle?" She got up, looking around and wondering if she should start the procedure for locking in a planet, and fire up *Question* to try and find her. *But she must be around here somewhere, right?* "Sparkle!"

"Told you there was somebody out here!" a voice behind Susan said, and she whirled around.

"Guess you were right. It's a girl."

"I can see that, you idiot!"

"My sensors are still going crazy though." Both slowly brought up pistols pointing in her direction, and no one moved. Susan took a good look at them, they were obviously soldiers. They had some kind of weird rank sticker on their foreheads, matching uniforms, and the one that was currently talking was holding up something on his wrist and pointing it at Susan.

"Mind telling me who you are, miss?"

Oh, this is just great.