

Lonely Divide

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Lonely Divide

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Lonely Divide

Robert Ziefel

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Lonely Divide

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For Carolyn

*Many people influenced my life.
Even though we walked different paths
you were one.
Thank you for being who you were,
at the time I needed you*

Lonely Divide

Chapter 1.1

Introduction

You find yourself in the home of the Narrator

You are standing in a room displaying a curious fusion of the child-like and the mature upon all sides. Books of every description overflow from shelves, some of which are glowing- the books, not the shelves. Who would make glowing shelves? I suppose if you got up that many times in the night to find a book it could be handy, but a light spell would be easier. Or just, I don't know, turning on a light? The switch is conveniently placed on the wall, right there. These books actually glow for effect, because I wanted them to, not because someone has actually taken the trouble to *imbue* a light spell into the... *ahem*

Books. On shelves. Continue. Also to be seen on various, also non-glowing shelves, are dolls. Neatly preserved in their original packaging, while figurines, plush toys and ancient video game machines crowd around them. Many of the figurines are scantily clad, but all seem to share a common large eyed heritage you could probably place if you thought more about it. All seem to have at one time been precisely placed, but now their display seems more haphazard. Almost as if a small familiar, like a cat, had at one time disturbed their positioning. The owner was either pleased with the slightly more chaotic feel of the layout or was just too lazy to straighten them out again... this cannot be determined simply by looking.

A large picture window to your left lets in sunlight through cream colored vertical blinds, and a yucky colored house with a black car can be seen outside, across the road. Despite the sun, the trees burst forth with not a single leaf, leading you to believe the season is early spring, which of course would be entirely correct. A calendar hangs from the computer desk, and shows it is sometime in March, proving in your mind just how good at the whole seasons guessing game you are. Turning around you can't help noticing the ungodly stack of ancient computers that sit in a heap behind you. Back and to the right are yet more shelves full of, as far as you can tell, junk. It probably has sentimental value? As you continue to glance around, a gray cat charges up to you and begins demanding something with a curiously squeaky cry. Looking down at it you can't help noticing how much the carpet needs to be vacuumed. *Obviously the*

home of a bachelor, you think to yourself, also noticing the wires trailing everywhere and the rack of swords on the wall. Yeah.

Hearing his cat crying the man in the room, how did you not notice him before, turns from the curious machine he is standing in front of. Obviously a computer, but with a screen that lays flat on the desk, and currently projects upward an image of what looks like a map. The man regards you seriously, as though waiting for you to explain yourself. He seems reluctant to speak. He seems average looking enough, with wavy brown hair, blue eyes, perhaps slightly taller than average, and thin. Finally the silence (such as it is, the cat still hasn't given up meowing at you and rubbing your legs) stretches too thin even for him. He speaks.

"Well, come right in, don't bother knocking or ringing the doorbell or swirling your cape dramatically and having a minion announce you." He pauses, then finally smiles. "I'm kidding with you, of course. I've been expecting you, and I didn't write you doing any of those things, so why would you? Also if you were not expected my barrier shields would have been fully active and done something either terribly hideous or humorously ironic to you as you entered, depending on my mood."

You begin to wonder about this person's sanity, he didn't "write you" doing those things?

"Yes, yes, you're in my power, you know. There's no getting around it apart from ceasing to read, and it's only the introduction, you wouldn't pick up something to read and then not give it a fair chance before putting it down again, would you? By that I mean you aren't *that kind* of person, are you? No, no, I thought not. I started directing your actions the instant you read the first word, which I graciously allowed to be about you, rather than me. Go back and look. I'll wait, go on."

You recall that he is correct, the very first word you remember reading was "You" and the sentence was about what you were doing, but is this strange person expecting gratitude? Then you can't help thinking... sentence? Are you reading about doing these things or doing them?

"Oh, it's much the same to me," says the curious man. "And no, I'm not expecting anything, I'm just pointing it out. Now come, I'm just putting on the finishing touches. Oh you needn't worry about spoilers, it's all very high level at this point. Not even I know the ultimate direction yet- Take a look!"

He gestures you over to the map, and you can see he's been working on the framework for an entire world, which he seems rather proud of. "Let me introduce you," he says, and dramatically centers his hands

over the model, then draws them apart. The room seems to fall away, and you are drawn into the framework. You find yourself standing next to him on a plain looking city street. The people walking seem to take no notice of either of you, in fact, they pass right through the man as though he were not even there. You step around any person coming at you, just to be safe. It is the cautious thing to do, even if evidence suggests you are currently intangible, or somehow not part of the current scene.

“This is just a set piece, of course. Wait, is that the right phrase?”

The man looks off to the side and makes a curious motion with his hands. Perhaps he is casting a spell of some kind?

“No, it’s the opposite of a set piece, according to Wikipedia, it’s more like a storyboard. Facade? It’s something, who cares? The name of the thing isn’t important, in this case. Usually I would say the opposite was true, wouldn’t you? But then I am a wizard, of sorts. This bit won’t be seen again, it’s just to set the scene. Like an opening shot in a movie, where the camera pans down and everything? You know what I mean.”

You do.

“Of course you do. Take a look around!”

As you do, you notice a blend of both the fantastical and the technological, both in the architecture of your surroundings and the people. In view you can see people with robot arms and legs, people who are obviously magical, regular people, and some fantastic creatures like fairies fluttering about. The buildings are both familiar city style dwellings and fantastic in nature, floating or otherwise showing the occupants are students of the mystical arts. In the distance you see a large shape in the sky and wonder if it’s a plane. As it comes closer you see it’s a dragon, but no one seems concerned as it passes overhead.

“His name is Vexixarax, I’ve just made it up right this second when I wrote him in. I have no idea if his inclusion here foreshadows any event in this story or not. Well I do, of course I do. But that’s the me in the future that knows, not this me, standing here now. You appreciate the distinction, I gather?”

Again, you do.

“Again, of course. So, by now you’ve realized the story is not set in either the world of tomorrow or the fantasy world of yesterday or of true magic or even your world of the everyday. Rather the combination of these things, just because I can. This is the world of Paragon™, yes I said Paragon™. How do you pronounce “™?” Well I don’t know!”

You hadn’t asked.

“You were going to. Anyway, I’ve created this world for the story you’re about to read, so I thought you would like to know what you were getting into. This world is a crazy place, full of people who have given up their bodies to become mechanical, wizards of great knowledge and power, and some fantastical creatures. Such as those I’ve just now recently described to you without saying a word. Speaking of that, everyone speaks the same language here, because honestly, get a worldwide language going already, people! At least one creature you might meet will seem to be from your mundane world, but which will have a hidden depth you wouldn’t have expected. Remember I said that, you’ll know him when you see him.”

You think to yourself that you’ll certainly try.

“Good.”

The man closes his hands up again, and the world shrinks to reveal the cluttered room.

“It’s actually a rare opportunity, you know, you arriving as you did. I haven’t put the forth wall in place for any of the major characters, so I’ll let them introduce themselves. Oh, one important thing to always remember- these people *know*.”

The man placed a finger aside his nose, as though telling a great secret and wanting you to recognize it as such. The gesture is totally lost on you, you have no idea what he’s getting at.

“I mean they know they’re part of a story, a “role playing game” type story from the Paragon™ book, and they are the main characters. They have character sheets and everything, you’ll see. It’s a very taboo thing to ask to see someone’s character sheet, of course, but that’s in the world. You’re not part of it, so go ahead and ask them. They won’t mind showing you. Now most people in stories don’t know they’re in a story, right? Also, typically, they don’t know exactly how good they are at certain things, or how much effort they need to expend to improve themselves. The people of this world do know those things. They have inventories, they have a *combat delay*, it’s totally without remark these things are true. For them, the natural state of the world is to be able to pull out a *character sheet* at any time to consult it, or add something to their *inventory*, or what have you. So don’t be surprised if they express amazement when you ask them about it.”

You wonder if you’re going to ask them about it.

“It’s not an interactive media, so I have to sort of guess at what questions you would ask, and then have you ask them on your behalf.

Like just then when I mentioned inventories and things, and you wondered what that all entailed. There is a glossary somewhere around here, you can look up terms in italic print there. I'll get it to you before long, in fact you may already have it. Look around, it's someplace. Anyway, you are under my power, as I said before, which is a big responsibility for me. I'm not a prankster, don't worry. I won't comically harass you in any way. I could," he said, holding up a finger, "but I won't. Keep in mind, once chapter 2 starts the forth wall will be up, so you won't be able to interact with them at all, so don't try. It'll just confuse the issue."

You nod appropriately.

"Excellent. If you don't get it, I appreciate your not letting me catch on, it's very mature of you. Live in ignorance, I guess that's the world's motto? I can't really tell, it's very confusing out there. Anyway, let's meet our *ESPer* character, he can tell you more about himself and the world. I won't say he's the main character, so take no notice of the order in which I introduce these characters, it's basically at random. I think?"

You wonder what an *ESPer* is, but the Narrator (as you've come to think of him) gives you no chance to ponder this question. He again expands the map and you find yourself standing without him. You are looking instead at a young man who is currently making what appears to be his laptop float in the air.

Chapter 1.2

Introduction

You are with Jake, in his room

You are slightly behind a young man in a very messy room. He has blond hair, and is slightly shorter than average. He seems to be concentrating quite intently on the object he's levitating, and doesn't notice you are there. However, the people in the city you just left did not react to your presence either, so you are unsure if he should or not. The room is quite cluttered, with posters of mostly naked models papering the walls. The bed is unmade, and clothes are heaped about the floor. On the top of all the crap on the desk you see a very official looking envelope and a letter with a government seal on it. You lean over to take a look. Again, the boy takes no notice of you, but sighs and continues spinning his laptop in midair, moving his hands around as he does so. Odd.

The letter reads:

Dear Jake Beachamp,

Congratulations on your upcoming graduation from high school. As you know, it is compulsory to register your PC/NPC status no later than one week after graduation. Provided is a list of centers you may visit. No appointment is necessary, walk in any time during business hours. The determination will consist of a confidential examination of your character sheet by a licensed CSR (Character Sheet Reviewer) and should take no more than ten minutes. Should you be found to be a PC, don't despair! You will be paired with other members of the PC community and given missions suited to your temperament and skill set. Death is very much unlikely, despite what you may have heard! If, on the other hand, you are found to be an NPC, you may continue your average life, with your average skills, and nothing interesting will ever happen to you. Unless, of course, you interact with PCs as part of their ongoing plots. If you wish to join NPC-PS as an NPC yourself, we have a number of positions always available, from clerical work to backup for PC teams. We would welcome your involvement!

Should you decide to forgo this examination, rest assured that wizards will hunt you down no matter where on Earth you try to run to, and bring you back. You or your family will bear the cost of such services, so I would advise against it.

Your term of service will be five years, after which you are free to pursue your own interests and whatever further adventures the Narrator might have in store for you. You will be discharged, totally assured you have done your part for the greater good of the community. You may also stay on with NPC-PS if that is your wish. All this can be discussed at the proper time. PC or NPC, a future with NPC-PS is a bright one!

We look forward to seeing you soon!

NPC Protective Services

What a strange letter, you think to yourself. Was it really written by a government official? Probably not, you decide, but rather that Narrator character you spoke to earlier. Oh, it seems Jake has tired of spinning his laptop in mid-air, and carefully floats it to his bed, turning around.

“Yeeaaaa!” he shouts, finally realizing you’re in the room with him. He swiftly looks around and points to his lacrosse stick, then at you, and it flings itself at you almost gleefully. Oh yes, with wild abandon it takes to the air, soaring up, up like a majestic bird, or a surface to surface missile of some kind. Oh sad for it that it harmlessly smacks off of you, and goes thumping dejectedly towards the floor.

“Oh, I’m really sorry!” says Jake, “you totally surprised me there, which I actually get a lot because of my oblivious weakness. Did I hurt you? If I did I can use *Healing Acceleration* and fix you right up.”

You indicate to him that you are unhurt.

“Oh, thank the Narrator. I had a vague feeling you were coming, and that I should answer any of your questions, not that I should fling stuff at you. You must be impervious or something, I flung that pretty hard. Which I’m sorry about, really.”

He does seem sorry, and offers his hand for you to shake, which you do.

“I’m Jake, nice to meet you.”

You introduce yourself to him.

“So you’re the Observer, huh? I guess it’s to be expected, once you become registered as a PC, you get an Observer, and I guess you’re it, huh?”

You wonder what all this PC/NPC stuff is about.

“Well, you must have that where you come from, right? I mean, some people go on to do great things, right, while others just sort of... live?”

You wonder if such a distinction can be said to be so black and white.

“Oh sure, it’s easy to tell, look.” Jake reaches behind you to get his letter. “The determination only takes a couple of minutes, I mean just looking at someone’s character sheet, you can tell.”

You wonder about this “character sheet” business and exactly how one could tell to look at one.

“Where exactly are you from? No, don’t answer that, I don’t think I’m supposed to know. Look, I’ll just...” Jake seems to hesitate. “I’ve never really shown it to anyone before, you know? I guess I better get

used to it.”

You have a slight panic attack at exactly what he’s talking about, but he doesn’t seem to be reaching for any zippers as he whips it out. He hands you a piece of paper, and you wonder where he pulled it from. You look it over.

“See, I have three stats that are above normal, ENDurance, RE-Solve and INSight. Because I’m an ESPer, of course, so the Narrator adjusted those because they’re the most important to my powers.”

Powers? Character Sheets? What?

“Okay, I guess you don’t know about any of that. I have powers because I’m an ESPer. See,” he points to the sheet where it says BACK-GROUNDS and listed is:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (ESPer)	3	Honorable	1
Energy Siphon	1	No Direction Sense	1
ESPer	4	Oblivious	1
Talent (TK)	1	Somatic Powers	1
Thoughtful	1	Youthful	1

“An ESPer is a person with psychic powers, you know, floating things, telling the future, leaving the body, all that kind of stuff.”

You realize “ESPer” is just sort a of shorthand term, made up to sound cool.

“I guess.” Jake laughs. “I think it stands for Extra Sensory Person? That doesn’t set me apart as a PC though, there can be NPC ESPers just like there can be NPC wizards.”

You wonder, then, what does?

“All NPCs have stats of five, that’s the easiest way to tell. Their skills are all fives as well. They’re just average in every way. We PCs are above average in some way, that’s why we get sent out on missions for the government.”

You think that sounds a bit dangerous.

“We always work with a team, there’s always a couple of PCs discovered at the same time. That’s how the government knows there’s about to be some kind of crisis. And we’re PCs, the Narrator allows us to try harder to stay alive than he tries to bump us off. Oh, there’s some danger of course, but without us there’s no story, so if we get killed, he’s

out of a job too.”

You think he would then make everything go the character’s way, and that wouldn’t be much of a story either.

“No, he has to obey the rules just like we do. He *rolls the dice* to see if we can do something, and manages our *energy* to help us succeed at things. If we run out of energy, or there’s a lucky roll by an NPC, we could still be hurt.”

You hand back the character sheet, and Jake puts it away, but somehow you don’t exactly catch what he does with it to do so.

“So like the letter says, tomorrow I go and tell the government I’m a PC, and they assign me a team and missions. Does that help clear things up?”

You suppose it does.

There’s a knock on the door, and a slightly shorter boy with a mechanical leg peaks in. “Mom says to come down to dinner. Oh hi!”

You start to respond, but he’s gone again.

“That’s my little brother. He needed a cybernetic leg for some reason a couple of years ago, but I can’t remember why. We both woke up in the hospital, and I was an ESPer and he needed a new leg. He doesn’t seem to mind, but he won’t tell me what happened either. My dad said he was given the choice of having a wizard repair the leg with magic or getting the cyber limb installed. He said the cyber limb was cooler, so he chose that. I guess it is a little cool. Well, I’ve got to go, I hope I helped a little! Oh, and I’ll forget I talked to you once the story starts, so if I think about things we talked about, just ignore it. Bye!”

He seemed like a nice young man, you think to yourself. But now how do you-

Chapter 1.3

Introduction

You are standing next to Jaden, workout equipment is all around you

“I’ll be right with you!” she says, landing another flurry of blows to the workout bag she’s currently pummeling.

You look over this girl and decide she’s probably Chinese, and pretty cute, too, if you’re into that sort of thing. “That sort of thing” being a young, cute, asian girl currently beating the snot out of her workout bag at high speed. Sweat is streaming off her face, and her uniform is a bit damp as well. You seem to be in a finished basement, stuffed with martial arts gear and training tools. Jaden gives a final shout and ends her workout, breathing heavily, and turns to greet you.

“Oh, you must be the Observer! I can’t believe the Narrator sent you to see me when I looked like this!”

You can totally believe it, based on what you saw of his living room/workshop/whatever that room was.

“I’m Jaden Shan, I’d shake hands but I’m all sweaty. Do you mind if I just ran and took a quick shower? I have to find Rose anyway, you’ll want to meet her. It’ll just take me a second, don’t go anywhere.”

You think it’s impossible for you to do so.

Jaden runs off up the stairs, so you take a closer look around your surroundings.

Minutes pass.

Then a few more.

You begin to feel forgotten: That is because you have been.

You head up the stairs and see that Jaden seems to live in a pretty nice house, her parents have some money, that’s for sure. You call out into the house, wondering where everyone is, but get no reply. You listen for the sound of running water, or something to indicate where she’s gone, but don’t hear anything. You move to the front door and look out, perhaps she went to get the mail or something and had to talk to someone? This seems farfetched of course but-

“Excuse me, who are you?” a voice asks from somewhere near the ground.

You look around, but don’t see anyone.

“No, under here, he’s scared of you and won’t come out.”

You wonder if you’re hearing voices now, and bend down, tilting your head to look under a nearby bush. To your surprise you see a fairy riding a rabbit, or more technically sitting on a rabbit, as the rabbit is currently not moving. The fairy is only a couple of inches tall, and female. She has short, golden hair and iridescent wings like a dragonfly. She’s not wearing anything that you can tell, but most of her is hidden by the head of the rabbit she’s sitting on, so it’s tough to say. She seems to be holding a rod with a tiny jewel at the tip, and it’s pointed at you. You wonder if such sights are commonplace around this household.

“No, he doesn’t let me ride too often, but it’s fun when he does. Now can you answer my question?”

You think for a moment, and recall she asked who you were. You tell her.

“Oh, that’s different then! She just ran off and left you down there? Honestly, that girl would forget her head if it wasn’t attached. One too many blows to the old noggin if you ask me. Come on, I’ll help you find her.” The fairy turns her attention to the rabbit, and talks to him in some way, then flutters her wings and darts towards you.

“I usually wear clothes when expecting visitors, you understand. It was just such a nice day out I couldn’t resist. Also I had only the vaguest sense the Narrator was going to send you, given we’ll be registering soon. Probably intentional, it would figure our Narrator was one of the oddball ones. Most things are, you know. Intentional, not oddball. Sorry if it bothers you, or anything. My being naked, not things being intentional. I guess I’m not making much sense at the moment. Let’s start over. I’m Rose Petal, nice to meet you.”

Suddenly, the fairy is person sized, and shakes your hand before shrinking back down again, and putting her wand back into her inventory.

Wait, you think, where did she just put that?

“She’s probably in her room, come on.” She zips through the door and you close it behind her.

Rose leads you up another flight of stairs, and yes, her parents make a pretty good living at something, you can tell by looking around.

“Just a second, I’ll go see if she’s in there. I don’t mind you see-

ing me like this, but she probably would. *Humans*. Mind you seeing *her* like this, if she's just getting out of the shower, I mean. Not seeing me, you've already- 'k bye." Rose takes her wand out of her inventory again, and wiggles it around while chanting. A glowing circle appears at her feet, and magical energy shimmers around her. The circle disappears, and Rose nods, satisfied. She puts her wand away again and passes through the door as if it wasn't even there.

You can't help thinking how extraordinary this world is.

Chapter 1.4

Introduction

You are now in Jaden's room, with Rose

“I’m sooooo sorry I forgot you!” pleads Jaden. She’s now fresh from the shower and wearing a robe, and Rose is sitting on her shoulder rolling her eyes. “I knew I had to do something afterwards, but I totally forgot what it was!”

You wonder how this is possible.

“She’s not stupid, if that’s what you’re thinking,” says Rose. “She just has forgetful, that’s all.”

You’re getting better at this, you know this must be something on the WEAKNESS side of her character sheet.

“That’s it exactly. Here, take a look.” Jaden hands you a sheet of paper, and again you miss exactly where it comes from. Rose also hands you hers, which is physically impossible, the paper is bigger than she is.

“What does that have to do with it?” she asks, confused.

You look at both. It seems Jaden has the FRIENDS background, probably why Rose here is hanging around rather than doing her own thing. Uh oh, Rose has HUNTED which can’t be good. You see at least one similarity with Jake, it appears Jaden also has Aptitude. Her list reads as follows:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (combat)	3	Forgetful	1
High Pain Tolerance	1	Honorable	1
Prodigy (Combat)	2	Insecure	2
Resources: Money	1	Obsessed	1
Talent (Martial Arts)	1		
Paragon (Martial Arts)	2		

Comparing that to Rose's list:

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Aptitude (magic)	3	Curiosity	1
Bilingual	1	Deep Sleeper	1
Fairy	3	Easily Infatuated	1
Natural Magician	4	Magical Focus	1
Permanent Spell	1	Naive	1
		Short Attention Span	1
		Won't Kill	1

Wait, there's that "Aptitude" again...

"Oh sure," says Jaden brightly. "It's pretty expensive, but it can pay off in the long run if you figure you're going to raise a large number of skills that are all related. Look on the back, see Rose has thirteen magical skills. Seven planets and six skills like Magical Theory. Aptitude raised them all by one, and lets you have an eleven skill rating when you've mastered the skill rather than ten. Just raising three skills to nine saves you thirty points over time. Heck, just as it is, Rose has saved," she starts counting up skills, "*seventy-eight points* just by having that one background! Nicely done, Rose!"

Rose blushes. "I didn't really have anything to do with it."

You deduce that this "skill rating," from zero to ten represents how good you are at doing something, with a zero meaning you have no training, and a ten meaning you have totally mastered the skill.

"That's right! Now take a look at mine."

You also deduce that, no, Jaden isn't stupid, is she? She explained that very well, and it's a pretty complex line of thought, given how tired she looks right now. You flip Jaden's sheet over and take a look. In the RTG column next to Martial Arts is an 8, but apparently when she actually attacks someone she treats the rating as though it was a *twelve!* A girl this young mastering martial arts to that level? Did she take every bonus she could to that particular skill?

"I think I did, actually," she says modestly. "I'm just getting started. My Paragon background lets me raise the skill without limit, and at half the cost it would usually take! Of course as Martial Arts costs double normaly, it's just brought back in line with other skills. That's okay. I can only be at an 8 rating right now because I'm just starting out. Once I

register and start doing missions, I can raise it higher than that.”

You can't help being impressed. Rose looks like she's losing interest, so you decide to bring her back into the conversation with a question about her background: Natural Magician.

“That relates to how I do magic. See, there's two kinds of magic users, Scholars of Magic that cast spells through study, and Natural Magicians who cast with energy. Turn it over again.”

You do.

“See, it lists my energy right here as 49. As every spell I cast uses at least one energy, I can only cast 56 spells in succession before I pass out. (My ENDurance is a 7, as you can see) I could do a few more than that if I paced myself because energy comes back over time, but that's about my daily limit. The advantage of my way of doing it is, if I really need something to work I can spend extra energy and give the magic a little boost. A Scholar can't do that!”

You look at the back again and notice she seems to have written down certain planets under the Skills column. How can a “planet” be a “skill” you wonder.

“Magic falls under the domain of a celestial body,” says Rose, angry that she can no longer say “planets” because stupid Pluto isn't considered a planet anymore. “Stupid scientists and their stupid not naming things planets which are planets.” (You can tell she totally knows better than scientists what a planet is.) “Like Mercury is spells relating to movement and Neptune relates to water. It's really all just a ploy to keep me from becoming too powerful as a spell caster, making me learn different skills for doing the same thing, casting spells.”

You wonder exactly what magic is in this world.

“Some believe it's just asking the Narrator to change the laws of physics in your vicinity and on your behalf. But come on, praying to a supreme being to intercede in reality for you alone, just because you asked nicely? Nobody's going to buy that.”

You are somehow made slightly uncomfortable by the way this conversation is proceeding.

“No matter how it works,” she continues, “you ask the forces of magic to do something and if you roll more than the difficulty, it happens. Then when the conditions for that asking have been met, the magic goes away. Of course you still have to maintain it, which is a pain. Still, I wouldn't give it up.”

It's magic, of course you wouldn't.

“There are exceptions, of course, like my permanent spell of Detect Enemies. That lets me concentrate and see if there’s anyone around who would want to hurt me. You can’t be too careful when you’re my size, you know.”

You start to hand the character sheets back, but then something that’s been bothering you makes you take another look. It’s as you thought, Jaden has “Forgetful” and Rose has “Short Attention Span.” That should make for an interesting friendship.

“We try to help each other out,” says Rose. “I help her remember things, and she helps me focus more on what I’m doing. It’s been that way since we’ve been together, which is a long time. She was just the cutest little kid!”

“Oh stop!” Jaden is blushing.

You ask how long that is, exactly.

“She was only a couple of years old when I met her, and I was probably about two at the time. Of course we fairies mature a lot faster, because we get killed easier. As a PC I got the ability to cast magic, so that’s helped me out a lot, we watch each others backs. And other things.”

They both are blushing now, and looking away from each other. Odd.

You tell them both it was nice to meet them, and you’re looking forward to seeing what they can really do in the story.

“It was nice to meet you too. I’m sorry again I left you down there. I hope I don’t disappoint you too much in the coming adventure!”

You wonder why she would do that, she seems quite capable.

“It’s her Insecure weakness,” says Rose. “She never believes she can do anything right. It’s kind of annoying, but I put up with it.”

You put your hand on her shoulder and tell her you’re sure she’ll come through all the challenges the Narrator creates with no problems.

“I’ll do my best!” she says, putting her fists up and pulling them down.

You smile, she sure will.

Chapter 1.5

Introductions

You are standing with Clayton at a shooting range.

You are standing behind a rather tall boy with black hair and dark skin. He has two guns in his hands, and looking around you see you're at a shooting range. You realize your left hand is still raised, and is now on the shoulder of this boy, who seems to have just been shooting targets. His left hand crosses his body and you look down the barrel of the pistol he's holding.

"Can I help you?" the boy asks.

You jerk your hand away, and mutter an apology and a curse to the Narrator who seems to delight in putting you in awkward positions. You somehow get the impression he's giggling.

"Narrator?" says the boy, turning around. "Oh, you must be the Observer."

You hastily explain that is in fact the case.

"Just a second."

He turns back and finishes firing the bullets out of both pistols, then pulls the empty clips out and safely takes apart the weapons. He hits a button and the target at the end of the range starts sliding forward. Because the Narrator is too lazy to roll every shot you see they are pretty much on target for the sake of his convenience. You look the boy over. His arms and head have been modified or replaced, they are gleaming metal instead of flesh and bone. You can also tell, as the boy turns around again, that his eyes have also been replaced with mechanical versions.

"Nice to meet you," lies the boy, giving your hand a perfunctory shake. "I suppose you'll want to see my character sheet, then."

Somehow this is not a question, but he doesn't wait for you to answer. He hands it to you and starts cleaning up his spent casings. You look it over, and the first thing that catches your eye is the amount of points in Cybernetics this kid has. Well, the first thing you notice is his name, Clayton Garlington, as he didn't tell it to you himself. Then you see his list that makes him the special flower he is.

BACKGROUND	COST	WEAKNESS	COST
Ambidexterity	1	Bad Tempered	1
Cybernetics	6	Obsessed (Shooting)	1
In the Cards	2	Overconfident	1
Resources: Money	2	Prejudice (gang members)	1
		Stat Penalty	2

You wonder aloud what the “in the cards” background does for him, and without turning around he answers simply.

“When the party gets cards, I get one more.”

You wait for a more lengthy explanation, but none comes. You wonder aloud why cards are involved.

“Don’t you know anything? Each PC gets a number of cards to help keep them alive through each adventure. Like “Missed Me” and “Made you Look.” They’re like a sort of spell, I guess, that cause things to go a certain way it might not otherwise have gone. I get one more than everyone else.”

You decide to just keep it in mind, it’ll probably come up soon and you can see a practical example. You continue looking at the character sheet. Lots of hacking, internet related or mental augmentations have been done to this kid. As well as his arms, greater armor, and a “weapon link.” You’re pretty sure that gives him some kind of bonus to shooting stuff, given how good he is at it. His Resources: Money of two is pretty nice, you understand it gives him \$10,000 of spending money every month, making him loaded.

“Not so much,” he explains. “For every point of cybernetics I have to spend \$100 a month maintaining them. I have 6 background points worth, that means 60 cybernetic points. 60x\$100 is \$6,000. So I only have \$4,000 per month left. I suppose the agency will pick up that tab while I work for them. Unless I want to work for them forever, it’s better to have my own money, you know?”

You do. A monthly fee equal to the cost of a decent used car, every month? And you thought the cost of gas was high! Cybernetics are a real money hole! You turn the sheet over, he doesn’t have too many skills, actually. He’s specialized all right, hacking and combat seem to be his focus. He grabs the sheet away from you and puts it away somewhere.

“Happy?”

You consider his demeanor, and decide to answer in the affirmative. His expression softens.

“I’m sorry, I’m not usually *this* bad tempered. It’s just I have to register tomorrow and I’m sure to get stuck with a bunch of half-wits. It’s the only way I’ll get XP and raise my skills, so I’ve gotta do it.”

You think perhaps the government might have something to say about it, if he didn’t. Especially judging from that letter you read back in Jake’s place. Clayton doesn’t seem worried.

“Unless they sent other PCs after me, I wouldn’t be too concerned. You’re right though, I have to do my duty, being a PC myself. It’s just such a drag, you know?”

You don’t.

“Oh, right. Say, have you met the other PCs I’m going to be grouped with?”

You say you have visited several others, why would the Narrator send you to people not related to the story? So yes, it must be them, but didn’t someone say the memory of this meeting was going to be erased anyway?

“Yeah, I suppose it would have to be. Guess I’ll find out myself then. Anything they didn’t answer?”

You think back to what he said a second ago, about XP and raising skills. Doesn’t practice increase someone’s skill at something? Like he was doing just a minute ago?

“Nah, that won’t raise my skill, you crazy? That was just me shooting at stuff, which I enjoy. I have to change the number on my character sheet with XP to get a better roll when I use a skill. I suppose that represents practice, but I really don’t have to do anything to make it work. Say I have an eight in my pistol skill, which I do. I need nine XP to raise that to a nine, so when I shoot someone I add a nine rather than an eight. You following me?”

You wish, if it wasn’t too much trouble, if he could show you an example?

“Sure,” he answers brightly. “You can’t be hurt, can you? I mean you’re not of this world, right?”

You seem to believe that’s the case, though with this Narrator you can’t be sure of anything.

“Okay, hold your hand out, yeah, like that. Now I’m going to make a called shot to your hand, right? Now usually it’s a minus two penalty to hit an arm, but I want to hit the hand specifically, so it’s a minus three.

Watch.”

He throws a punch at your outstretched hand, and you somehow realize he “rolled” a nineteen. This is one from his maximum “roll,” and then with the minus three penalty he wound up with a sixteen to hit you. As you aren’t dodging, and the difficulty to hit something that’s just standing there like a lump is a five, he easily hits you with his metal fist. You are unhurt.

“See,” he says. “Now with a nine rating, that would have been an even twenty, winding up to be a seventeen.”

You nod your head, understanding. If you had tried to dodge, you would have “rolled” your “active dodge” and if your number was greater than his, he would have missed. You wonder what your “active dodge” would actually be...

“Hope that cleared that up for you.”

It did.

Clayton finishes carefully packing his guns away. “Guess I’ll see you- or no, I guess I won’t will I? You’ll only be able to watch through the forth wall. Hope the Narrator doesn’t make me do something stupid!”

You hope that as well, and this time shake his hand more properly.

Chapter 1.6

Introduction

You are again with the Narrator

“There you have it,” he says to you, pleased at how much longer that took than he expected. He knows it just means he’ll have to come up with less plot for later, and he threatens to giggle again. He gets himself under control. “I hope you learned some things about the world, and that my characters work out for you.” He fiddles with the map. “There, the forth walls are in place and our story can begin!”

“Enjoy!”

Chapter 2.1

Coming Together

*You are Jake, sitting at a government office,
about to have your character sheet examined.*

You are sitting in a government building with your back to a grey wall, painted neither well nor badly. The seat underneath you is made similarly. Not too comfortable, but not too uncomfortable either. Average, in other words, like so many other things around you. You are sitting at the left end of the bench, and to your right sit several of your classmates who have also waited until the very last day to be examined. All your life you have tried to be just like everyone else- average.

There was only one problem; no two problems with that plan. The first was that you could run longer than anyone else in school before getting tired, and both your drawings and writings seemed to turn out slightly better than anyone else's. Many people suspected both your INSight and your ENDurance were higher than average, but only your parents knew how willful you were, revealing your RESolve to be higher than average as well. It wasn't that people with higher stats were teased, exactly, but would *you* want to play with someone you knew was demonstrably better than you? After it was found out you were an ESPer, it was doubly hard to keep it quiet. Your talent for ESPer skills give it away quite plainly. You don't exactly recall when you discovered your powers, but you know your brother had something to do with it. If only you could remember!

You can't see or hear or even sense with ESP that the Observer is around, but you are pretty sure they are. It's sort of a silly superstition, really, that each group of PCs that get together are assigned someone to watch their adventure by the Narrator. The argument is, if someone from the outside doesn't observe the adventure, does it really happen? When you're alone you think maybe it's the case, but when someone actually talks to you about it, the whole idea seems silly. Odd how that happens. Observers? Rubbish!

A man in uniform is striding now towards your group, and while he does not specifically look at you any more than the others, you somehow know you are going to the called next. You stand.

The man looks a little surprised, and asks “Jake Beachamp?”

You nod, and he motions you to follow him. You do, and pass through a sort of office space with green cubicles set uniformly through the entire floor. Many other young men and women are sitting at chairs in front of desks, while trained military personnel study their character sheets. You expect to hear some noise from their talking, but oddly enough the entire place seems silent. *Probably some kind of privacy spell on the whole place*, you think. He turns into his own cube, and motions for you to sit down.

“Sergeant Baggesen,” he says, introducing himself and giving you a crisp handshake across the desk before he sits down. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me before we begin?”

“You’ll see it plainly enough,” you say, handing your character sheet over to him. He takes it and begins to look it over.

“I see,” he says, nodding. “An ESPer, that’s how you knew I would call you next. Yes, this all looks fine.”

“So there’s no mistake?” you ask.

“With two sevens and an eight stat? I don’t think so. You’re a PC all right, welcome to *NPC-PS!*”

They “graciously” allow you a day to pack some things, and then you are shipped off to a military base to receive your first assignment. Unlike the normal branches of the military, PCs didn’t have ranks or boot camp or anything like that, as it would be pointless. You, and those like you, are drafted for the good of the world. On a positive note, most people look up to PCs, and aspire to be like them. Which would you rather have on your side during a bank robbery: An average policeman with a 5 both in Weapon: Pistol and *Ranged Combat* or someone from NPC-PS with a 10 in both? And an 8 MANipulation rather than a 5? It was also commonly known that, given proper training, both an ESPer and a magic user could leave at any time via Teleportation. NPC-PS gave agents plenty of leeway between missions, and perks to make they didn’t want to skip out early. They were, after all, probably risking their lives with every mission to keep others safe.

You do have to wear a special uniform, and stay at the barracks, mainly so if something comes up you can be brought to the field rapidly. The “barracks” is really a small apartment building, fully furnished and really quite comfortable. Also the food isn’t too bad, and there’s an extensive library of mission records that can be browsed through. Even if

you don't have any XP to spend at the moment, you can still read things and see how other's missions went. If you ever run into something like that yourself you can be better informed this way, so while the average NPC isn't going to be allowed in to read the records, you are given the clearance to do so. There is also a classroom, where teachers can help you spend double your *REASON per week* rather than just your REASON on a skill you want to increase. You can also sign up to teach a course if you have a high rating and the Teaching skill. *All in all*, you think, *it's not too bad a deal, being a PC*. Your basic needs are met, and you get to go have adventures, really what could be better?

After you arrive and check in with your Commanding Officer, Sergeant Draughon, you get a quick tour of the facility from an NPC and get introduced to the various people you'll need to know to do your job. You can requisition weapons, fake IDs, clothing, gear, whatever your current mission requires. From the magical to the mundane. Of course there's a lot of paperwork to be signed to do any of that, and everything has to be accounted for when the mission is over. It's sometimes more of a hassle than it's worth. It's almost better to save up for your own gear, so that you can learn any quirks it has before it falls apart on you in the field. After the tour you are told you're the last to arrive, would you like to meet the rest of your team?

Obviously, you do.

You are brought to a conference room by the NPC and see five other people there; scratch that, four other people and one fairy. *This ought to be good*, you think to yourself. One person is your CO, who you met earlier. The person sitting at the head of the table must be his superior. To his left sits a guy about your age with cyber arms, and to his right sits an Asian girl who looks rather nervous. A fairy on her shoulder was yawning as you came in, but she perks up and looks you over.

"Ah, you're here," says the man at the end of the table. "The team is finally complete, so we can get into your first mission. Have a seat. Jake right?"

"Yes Sir," you answer quickly, sitting down.

"Good, good, I'm Master Sergeant Zucconi. If things go smoothly for you this will probably be our only meeting. If not, I'll be chewing you out later. Otherwise Sergeant Draughon here, whom you've all met, will be giving out your assignments." He pulls a folder from a briefcase hidden behind the edge of the table. "Now let's see, says here you need

to kill ten rats and bring back their tails... this can't be right!"

Sergeant Draughon looks over and they talk in a hushed tone.

"Looks like my secretary gave me the wrong file. This isn't even in the same genre as you guys. I'll be right back, you might as well introduce yourselves, you'll be working together from now on, after all."

He gets up, puts the file back in his case and walks out.

Everyone rolls their PERSONALITY check to see who will speak up first, and Jaden wins it with a 15. Even taking her Insecurity into account, a minus one, she still beats everyone by 4. Oddly, Rose Petal who has the highest PER rolls minimum, a 7, and is now pouting and doesn't want to talk to anyone.

"Hi, I'm Jaden Shan," she says hesitantly, her eyes down. "I hope we can all work together."

"Clayton Garlington," says the cyborg, surprised to be going second.

You and Rose introduce yourselves, the Narrator blurs this part a little because as the Observer you already know everything about them, and he doesn't want to bore you. The Master Sergeant comes back in the room.

"Now I have the right file," he says, sitting down again. "Sorry for the mix up. She must have rolled minimum on her Bureaucracy check, and I missed my Perception check to notice. Not a good start, I suppose. Anyway, this group seems to have a wide range of skills, so something big is coming. We need to get you some XP right away, but as starting characters your missions still need to be something you can handle. I think we've got just the thing for you."

He hands out some sheets of paper from the folder, and you look it over.

"As you can see, there's a new drug, though I hate to call it that, that's being distributed in New Mexico. You can read the reports, but in short, some wizard or group of wizards is *Imbuing* spells into every day foods and leaving it around for people to find. It probably started out as just a prank, but it's been getting worse, with better spells being used all the time. It goes like this- someone steals a condiment packet like ketchup or even pepper and does an *Imbuing* into it. Then they put it back. Someone takes it, uses it on their food unknowingly, and suddenly finds themselves under a magical effect. Harmless enough in most cases, but apparently it doesn't matter to whoever is doing this if they actually succeed or not. We've seen some cursed food packets circulating too.

This has to be stopped. Travel to New Mexico, find out who's been making these things, and bring them in. If it's a group, shut them down or call for backup. Good luck."

The packet contained more details of course, where the most food packets had been seen, a list of all the spells that had been observed, that kind of thing. We weren't operating totally in the dark, after all. You feel something odd as the Master Sergeant leaves the room, and you check your character sheet. You have cards, three of them!

Looking at them, you sigh dejectedly.

"What's wrong?" asks Rose, fluttering over to you.

"It's these cards! Why did I have to get card 21 right off the bat?"

"You better not use it!"

"Don't I know it!"

By then everyone had their character sheets out and were looking them over.

"How do these card things actually work, anyway?" asks Clayton.

"Basically they're given out at random by the Narrator," explains Sergeant Draughton. "Just remember you have them, and if you want to use one, just declare it, and the Narrator makes it happen."

"Just like that? Because I want to use card 35 right now."

There's a flash, and a large cardlike object floats out of him, disappearing in a flash of light and sparkles. You catch a glimpse of it, and it seemed to have a black and white drawing of a girl with pompoms on it. You feel something again, and you've gotten another card.

"Oh, thanks," says Jaden sarcastically. "16? Not as bad as 21 but come on!"

"I got card 33, so I thank you, I need all the help I can get!" says Rose.

"Sure thing. As it turns out, I'm using that card I just got, number 14, which had the same exchange value as my Rally, so it works out nicely for everyone."

Again, a cardlike object appears before Clayton and shimmers to dust, and you catch a glimpse of a bespectacled kid with a +2 over his head. You guess he just got two XP. Wait a second...

"I'm playing a card too!" you announce. "I play card 38, gimme that card 35, which I play myself!"

There's a larger flash of light this time, as the two cards shimmer in and out of existence, and again, everyone is dealt another card.

"Wow, you're pretty well prepared for your first mission," says

Sergeant Draughon. A lesser man than him might think the deck was somehow stacked for these guys, but the Narrator would hasten to assure him it was as random as it could be. Speaking of the Narrator-

“Just keep in mind guys, the Narrator gets cards to use against you, and you don’t know what he just spent to make your adventure harder. He spends for the NPCs you’ll be fighting against, so be aware. Oh, and be sure to turn any in for XP before you leave this room, that’s the point of no return for you.”

You suddenly realize each card as an XP value, and you can give up the use of the card in order to gain that much XP. You look your cards over, as does everyone else.

“I’m turning in 30 and 37,” says Jaden, and the cards appear and are then slashed apart.

“I’ll turn in number 5,” says Clayton, and it gets slashed apart.

“Do we have any other cards to negate damage?” asks Rose.

“I do,” you answer.

“Okay, then I’ll turn in card 11.” It gets slashed up and disappears. “Anything that hits me will kill me, so reducing it by half isn’t going to help me any. I’d rather have the 2XP.”

“You can trade cards you know,” says Draughon. “Or just give them to someone else.”

“Shoot, I forgot about that!”

“We should be fine, with all the extras we got,” says Clayton.

“I’m sure our first adventure won’t be too hard, right?” asks Jaden.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for it. What if I mess it up for everyone?”

“Don’t worry,” you reassure her. “We’re here for you.”

“I’ll... I’ll do my best!”

Chapter 2.2

Coming Together

You are Rose Petal, on a plane bound for New Mexico.

“Couldn’t we have just gotten there by magic?” you whine, looking out the window. “I’m bored.”

“Probably,” answers Jaden, “The Narrator must want us to talk about something.”

“Like what?”

“I did have a question for you, actually, maybe it’s that.”

“Ask away. Being away from nature makes me nervous, so I think the sooner we finish this conversation, the sooner we can get back on the ground.”

“When I was watching you study *Imbuing* you said actually making anything would cost you XP, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So how can this NPC or group of NPCs go around making *Imbued* items for laughs? Isn’t it costing them XP too?”

You scratch your head, wondering how to explain. “It’s different for them in certain ways. See, me making a magical item provides me a benefit, with me being a PC and all. So I have to give something up in order to get it. In essence I have to sacrifice raising skills or stats in order to make it. Plus my learning the skill, plus all the time it takes, plus the fact I have to pay money for “supplies” which is sort of left hanging. I guess because magical items can be so powerful, the Creator had to really limit them in that way. Their making of these poisoned food items isn’t benefitting them directly, and on top of that it’s plot related. So the Narrator gets a little leeway in letting them make stuff. Clear?”

“Creator?”

“Yeah, the being who made our world of Paragon? Sheesh Jaden, I didn’t think you were that forgetful, I know you talked about this at school. The Creator gave the world laws, and provided structure for the Narrators. The Narrator decides what kind of world it will be, and what adventures take place.”

“You know I’m not big on religion.”

“I know,” you say, rolling your eyes. “I know all this stuff because

I'm closer to nature than you are."

"Right now we're both pretty far from nature."

"Don't remind me. Just think of it as different dimensions, and you'll be okay."

"I'm not much for science either."

"Dimensions are magical! At least some of them are..."

"That reminds me, do you know any Teleport magic? That'll get us home faster."

"No, that's a grade eight spell. The only motion magic I know is Floating Fingers, a very weak telekinetic force, and *Unicorn's Tunnel*."

"Unicorn's Tunnel? Unicorns live out in the forest, not tunnels, silly. Even I know that much."

"I'm not even sure they exist, myself. But the spell is supposedly named after some black unicorn who came up with it, whose name has been lost to time. Basically you cast the spell on a surface and it glows orange. Then you cast it at another surface and it glows blue. The two connect and you can step from one to the other. Why am I telling you this, you've seen me do it! Remember when your dad wanted to move that couch into the living room? I put one end of the tunnel on the inside of the truck, and the other end on the wall on the inside of the house, and they just shoved it through."

"Oh yeah," she said, brightening. "I didn't know what it was called though."

You decide to go talk to someone else in your little group, not the scary guy with the metal arms, that just leaves the other boy. *Why couldn't there have been more cute girls in this group*, you ask yourself. You suppose two boys and two girls has a certain symmetry, but you really wish you had another girl to talk to. They're so much nicer than boys...

Chapter 3.1

First Mission

You are the scary guy with metal arms, stepping off the plane.

The first thing you do is go into the bathroom and get your guns out of their case. You load them and put them into your inventory, ready to be Quick Drawn. You feel better now. Magics and ESPers and all that are fine, but you prefer to rely on something a little less prone to being distracted at a critical moment. With that taken care of, you meet up with the others and check into your hotel room. You're sharing a double with Jake, who you've been getting to know on the plane ride over here. He seems to have an average personality, just like you. He doesn't know too much about guns, but he did describe all the ESPer stuff he knew how to do, and he did know a little about hacking, so you were able to talk with him about that. His ESPer stuff is actually pretty interesting, you'll be looking forward to seeing what he can do in the field. Jaden and Rose got a single room, which made them both blush a little, which you can't figure out. She's a fairy, she can sleep in a drawer for crying out loud, what's the big deal? You can't figure women out.

You do notice Jaden moves with a confidence she doesn't seem to display, like her body knows something she doesn't. You're pretty sure she'll be okay if it comes to a fight. The fairy is another story, if she's a magic user she could be capable of anything, based on what spells she's learned and the planets she's studied. She stayed away from you on the flight over, so you're not sure exactly what spells she can cast. Her size will put her in danger regardless, so you'll have to watch out for her, you decide.

In fact, you wonder if that would be good enough to play card 23, and while Jake is distracted with taking stuff out of his inventory to put into drawers here, you quietly make that declaration. The Narrator seems to approve, the card appears and shimmers, letting you know it's active, and then fades away. Good, you protect the fairy for this adventure and you get two more XP. Sweet. You're down to just two cards, and you know you'll be playing another in just a few minutes. You shake your head, the adventure has hardly begun, thank goodness you get an extra card. Maybe you should check your guns again? You resist the urge and

go down to meet up with the others in the lobby to discuss what your next move is. They, like you, are wearing their uniforms at present, and people nod to you respectfully as they pass. That'll take some getting used to.

The fairy is off sitting on top of the register and chatting with the girl behind the counter. She's kicking her little legs back and forth, obviously oblivious to any danger, so you scan the area for anything that might threaten her. There doesn't seem to be anything, but you can't be too careful. Your obligation satisfied for the moment, you turn to the other two.

"Let's get this going," you say. "I don't want to be here for days. I can use my next to last card, number 41, and get us an in with someone in the local area who can help. The rest will be up to us, but at least it'll save us some time. Unless someone has Information Gathering?"

You wait, but both of them shake their heads.

"The best I can do is just sense around with ESP, see if I get any bad vibes. That will take way too long though."

"Yes it would. Okay, I'm declaring the use of card 41."

Again a card appears, which seems to depict a black haired girl talking angrily on a phone. As expected it shimmers and disappears, just like the others. Everyone in the place stops to watch as this happens, it's a rare glimpse, as most NPCs never see a card being played in their lives. When the sparkles fade they go back to doing whatever they were doing, and conversations start up again.

"Oh yeah," you recall. "I know someone around here, he used to run in a gang back home, but after I had a talk with him, he decided it would be better if he left town. I've kept tabs on him, so I know where he works. Come on."

Strange how you didn't even think about this guy until you played that card. You could get to like having such a powerful tool at your disposal, no doubt about that!

You make sure the fairy knows you're leaving, and you stick close to Jaden, who she flies over and sits on again.

"Did you see how cute that girl behind the desk was?" she whispers to Jaden.

"Oh, um, no I guess I didn't," says Jaden, looking away sort of embarrassed.

You're a bit perplexed- that girl was average looking, just like every other NPC in the world. What was Rose talking about?

You and the group head down to a sandblasting place you know Van works at. Coincidentally it's not that far away, so you don't need to take the rental car. It's in the back of a large complex of buildings, and the fairy goes and talks to the squirrels and birds nearby.

"Learn anything useful?" you ask as she comes back.

"Just saying hello, it's the polite thing to do, after all."

You wouldn't know, not being a fairy, and all.

"Also I don't sense anyone who means me harm around here, so we're probably all okay."

You give a grunt, and push the door open to step inside. You make sure Rose is in before you close it, you don't want her wings getting caught in it! To your left is a glassed off area with some computers, and both a man and a woman inside doing office work. You see the door through the glass, and motion the others to wait there. Stepping around the corner you fish your badge out of your inventory and open the door.

"Can I help you?" asks the man, rising from the chair.

You flip open your badge and he glances at it. "Is Van Levengood around?" you ask.

"Yes he is, may I ask what this is about?"

"It's nothing serious. We're on the case of some magically poisoned food and I thought he might be able to point us in the right direction because he lives around here." You put your badge back into your inventory.

"I read about that in the paper, that people should be extra careful. Glad to see the NPC-PS is looking into it. Do you think he's involved?"

You shake your head. "No, just a convenient starting point. Unless he became a wizard since I last saw him!" You laugh.

"If he had, he wouldn't be working here," the man says. "Come on, we'll go find him."

The man takes you out of the office and down a couple of steps into a large garage like area.

"Hang back," you tell the others. "If he sees a whole group he might bolt." The fairy is looking around interestedly, but the others nod.

The man takes you further into the building and you see a couple of workers inspecting some large piece of steel framing, obviously something they have or are just going to work on. You spot Van rolling a large wheel like object out a side door onto a truck elevator, which rises and lifts the wheel into the truck, where another man rolls it into the front and begins securing it. Van turns around and spots you.

“Clayton?” he asks, surprised. He looks you over. “You’re in NPC-PS now? No way!”

“That’s right, so you better show some respect.”

“Whatever, man. What you want me for, I haven’t been running with gangs no more since I left town, just like you told me.”

“I’m here to see if you know anything about this magical food stuff going on around town.”

“Oh, that? I don’t know much, but I guess I did see one thing-” he trails off as a loud vacuum sound starts up, and a faint cry for help is heard. Everyone looks over to the right and you see your group frantically looking around.

“For Pete’s sake, what are those clowns- I mean, uh, your fellow PCs doing over there?” says the manager, rushing off to investigate. You both follow, and he hits a button that turns the machine off. Rose Petal stops hanging on for dear life and weakly flutters back to Jaden.

“Thanks,” she weakly says, dropping to sit on Jaden’s shoulder. “Didn’t know that button would do that.”

“This is where we do the sandblasting, that turns the vacuum on that sucks up the dust,” the manager explains.

“What the heck were you thinking!” you shout. “You could have been killed!”

“There was a button, I wanted to see what it did,” she answered simply. “I can’t see a button and not press it.”

“Next time you better not press it. You’re supposed to be representing the best and the brightest, remember? We’re PCs, you can’t just go around touching stuff, especially in a place like this.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, looking down.

“She really can’t help herself,” Jaden says, “I’ll try to keep her out of trouble, but she really didn’t mean any harm by it.”

Unfortunately, you roll minimum on your RESolve check, a 6, so it takes you a little while to calm down. As you’re railing against Jaden for not keeping her pet in check, Rose for being air headed, fairies for being dumb in general, you fail to notice Jake declaring the use of card 21.

Chapter 3.2

First Mission

You are Jake, and you have had enough of this ranting.

You realize Clayton is just as helpless against his own weaknesses as Rose was, that's why he's going on about this. Also you didn't feel any danger with ESP in her poking around, so you let her and the blame is partially yours. This little tirade however is getting you nowhere, and you see the chance to pick up some extra XP. You quietly declare the use of card 21, which appears and seems to have The Dark Haired Girl with a halo above her head and a knife behind her back smiling and listening to Glasses Guy. You put your hand on Clayton's shoulder and spend maximum energy on RESolve, using *Compulsion* as you say "Why don't you go outside and cool off?" The fates are with you; you manage a 27 on the check.

Even spending max energy, Clayton knows he can only roll a 25, so he is compelled to go outside and cool down for your rating minutes in the skill: which would be 2.

You are down to 48 energy, but you have gained 4 XP for taking control of the situation away from Clayton.

"Now," you say, using *Compulsion* again, this time with only two energy, making your check HDL[10] + 2, "You are going to tell me everything you know about this food situation." Van was going to anyway, just to get rid of you guys, so he doesn't spend energy, and rolls a 10 to resist. He starts talking.

"I don't know much. I was at Big Chain Restaurant a couple of nights ago eating dinner, when suddenly this girl seems to just die. Her head just flops backwards and blood starts spurting out all over. Naturally her date seemed visibly distressed, to say nothing of the poor girl. She started shouting and carrying on like she was dying or something. Well this kid, probably nine or ten years old starts laughing and laughing and runs out. The girl is screaming, her date makes his CONstitution check to stay conscious but he doesn't know what to do. Everyone was yelling, it was a freaky scene."

"Rose?" I ask. *Maybe if I ask her about this she'll calm down a little from what Clayton said to her.*

“Neptune spells can create illusions, you say she looked dead?”

Van nods.

“And she was fine again in a couple of minutes?”

Again, Van nods.

“Sounds like Mask of Death,” Rose says, getting a 13 on her *Magical Theory* check. “I don’t know it, but it’s good for battlefields if you want to surprise someone. It makes you look like you’re dead, but that’s it. Seems like just a prank to me.”

“Sure, but what would have happened if it had turned out to be cursed?”

“It might never have gone away, or made her see everyone else as being dead, it’s hard to say. Depends on how creative the Narrator is feeling at the time.”

“I guess. Did you see what the kid looked like?”

“Well, he was pretty average looking.”

You glare at Van.

“He was! I don’t know. He was wearing a blue jacket with some guy with a sword on the back. I think I’d seen him there before, he must live in the area.”

“Okay, it’s a start,” you say. “It could just be some random kid, or it could be he was there waiting to see what would happen. Either way, we’ll check it out. Thanks.”

“Sure, glad to help,” said Van, who was more honestly just glad to be rid of us, I felt.

We went back outside, where Clayton was waiting for us. Jaden and Rose Petal stay opposite him, to my left, and we head back to the hotel to make further plans. Clayton apologizes for his behavior earlier, but both girls still glower at him. *This’ll take a while to sort out*, you think.

“Our best bet at this point,” you say, back in the lobby of the hotel, “is to just walk the neighborhood, or fly, excuse me Rose, looking for this kid. I know it’s a long shot, but maybe we’ll get lucky. We are PCs after all.”

“I don’t mind invoking card 33,” says Rose. “If we haven’t had any action in a few days.”

“That’ll do it! You don’t have any spells that’ll help?”

“No, Jupiter is divination, and I don’t know any Jupiter spells at all. Sorry.”

“It’s okay, you probably never needed them before. I’ll use my ESP but until we see him it’s just going to be LUCk checks every day and wandering around. Stay near the Big Chain Restaurant near dinner time, otherwise just look at kids on bikes and stuff.”

They all nod and we decide to call it quits tonight when it gets dark. They also agree to meet back up someplace for dinner. They all head out separately.

You feel the Narrator has rolled the party’s LUCk checks and he actually rolled the maximum for you, a 15, so you think there’s a good chance you’ll find this kid before the night is through. You return that night empty handed.

“Your LUCk check was a 15 and even you didn’t find him? What does the Narrator want us to do?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m going to do,” you say. “Who has the highest LUCk of all of us?”

You go around the table and find out only Rose has a slightly higher than average luck.

“Fine,” you say. “Tomorrow I’ll use card 34 on you, Rose, because I have the highest INSight, so it’ll have the greatest impact. Let’s save card 33 for a real emergency.”

“Sure!”

Jaden isn’t talking much, she seems to still be mad at Clayton. *Inner party conflict is a terrible thing*, you think to yourself.

The next morning, you declare the use of card 34 on Rose, and it appears and shimmers like always. The picture is of Glasses Guy as you call him, and some dude in a trench coat pulling The Dark Haired Girl out of some ice. Now when Rose makes her LUCk check she’ll add your INSight, a 7. You again split up, and tell Rose to tail him to wherever he lives, as it’s a little hard for her to use a cell phone. They’re bigger than she is!

Unknown to you, Rose gets one from minimum on her LUCk check, working out to be the same as you rolled, a 15! She hates to think you spent that card for nothing, so she spends one of her two XP to have the result re-rolled. The law of averages works out, this time she gets maximum, a 25, and almost without effort finds the kid with the jacket you are all looking for. She turns invisible, a fairy power costing her two energy, and tails him to an apartment building. He’s carrying a backpack,

so she just hitches a ride on the back until he gets home. Lucky for her he seems to be heading home when she see him, so she doesn't get bored and fly off before she figures out his address. Once he goes inside the apartment she makes note of the number and flies off to meet with the others.

“Great job!” you exclaim when Rose tells you the kid's address. “What do you think, should we go right now before he has a chance to leave any other little surprises for people?”

“We can't just go into his house without a warrant,” says Clayton. “Even we have to follow the rules. And we have no proof he did it, he just laughed at the situation and left. We'd have to talk to him, either get him to confess or tell us he had nothing to do with it.”

“What if he was outside at the time?” asks Jaden.

“Yeah, we could wait for him to leave again, then ask him a few questions. If he runs, we have probable cause to grab him and question him further. If he doesn't, maybe he isn't involved at all.”

“So we'll have to wait until tomorrow then?” you say, annoyed.

“Not exactly,” says Jaden, looking at Rose, who is currently making a spoon float in the air with magic. “You could get him outside, couldn't you Rose?”

“He's not my type,” says Rose, distracted.

“I meant with magic, silly!”

“Oh! You mean with the Tunnel spell. I guess I could.”

“Let's go then!” says Clayton, getting up.

You all head over to the apartment complex, and Rose casts one end of Unicorn's Tunnel behind the place, so we can't be seen from the road.

“Get ready to grab him out of there,” he says.

“Wait, we can't go in there, that's the point,” says Clayton, exasperated. “It doesn't matter if we use the front door or magic to see the inside!”

“Oh, we don't have to set one foot inside the place,” says Rose. “What do have this ESPer for, anyway?” She then flitters up to peek into his window and see if he's near a wall.

Clayton nods, he gets what Rose has in mind.

Rose has a 13 on a LUCK check, so he's not as close to a wall as she would like, but it'll have to do. She uses *Subtle Casting* to hide the

effects of casting magic into the room, and speeds it up by 2 segments, giving her a total penalty of -4. She gets a 19 on the Subtle Casting, and the kid gets a 10 to notice it, so he doesn't. She puts an extra 4 energy into the spell to compensate for the penalty, and gets a 20 to open the tunnel. Through the window she can see the street below, and the kid's head whips around as a hole opens in his wall.

You are waiting on the street next to this glowing section of wall, ready to throw your Telekinesis power through and grab the kid when you see him. Suddenly it opens, and you both make *Initiative* checks to see who goes first. You put two energy into REFlexes to try and get a better result, and you get a 16. The Narrator doesn't allow him to do so, given he's been taken by surprise, so he can't roll higher than a 15. You go first. You make a TK check and spend another two energy to activate the power, grabbing him and hauling him through the hole. You don't realize he spends two energy to try and grab onto the bed when he's yanked, but your 17 beats his 16 anyway, and he comes sailing out through the hole. Rose, watching from above, ends the spell the moment he clears it, and flutters down to rejoin the party.

"Stay calm, we just want to talk to you," you say, spending 3 energy on RESolve and rolling *Compulsion* again. You get a 3, which is pathetic, he doesn't even have to roll to beat that. You resolve to start working on that skill group immediately when you get back. You rolled a 5, but as you're currently still holding him with TK, it's a -2 to every other power you try to use.

"I'm not telling you anything," says the kid. "Now let me go!" He's currently floating in mid air, struggling like a fish on a line, but really he can't go anywhere.

"Look," says Clayton. "We just want to know where you got that Illusion spell from. We you know saw that poor girl eat it and start to look dead. You tell us that, and we go on our way and forget we ever saw you. Don't cooperate, and we're taking a little trip down to the station on suspicion of Illegal Magic Usage, which is pretty serious, let me tell you."

"I got rights!"

"Sure you do, and you're young yet. You'll get put in Juve rather than prison, I'm sure it'll be like a five star hotel for you."

"Watch out," says Rose, "he's a wizard himself."

“Is that so?” says Clayton, Quick Drawing a pistol from his inventory. He got an 18, meaning he reduced his Active Delay by 6, making it appear instantly. “I think my trigger finger is faster than his spell casting though.”

“Don’t hurt him!” says Rose, flying over and grabbing the gun, trying to pull it so it’s not pointing at the kid anymore. She fails of course.

“I won’t shoot him,” says Clayton, making the kid look relieved. “Anywhere vital.” He starts to look nervous again.

“Look, I’ll talk, okay? Just don’t hurt me!”

“What’s going on down there?” shouts a voice from the window above, as the Narrator plays card 29 as a card 12, making things more interesting for the party. “Leave my son alone!” Again, the Narrator plays a card, number 18 this time, and the man at the window suddenly has a hunting rifle.

“Oh crap!” says Clayton, as everyone rolls initiative.

Rose goes first, she rolled really well, and gets her wand out of her inventory. (Apparently she put it back after casting the tunnel spell. Give her a break, she’s new at this.) She’s right next to the kid, so she grabs onto him. Her delay goes up by 7.

Clayton holds, but brings his gun up and shouts “NPC-PS, sir, drop the weapon and put your hands where I can see them!” Remembering his vow to protect the fairy, he steps in front of the kid as a free action. If that guy shoots the bullet will have to go through him first.

Jaden is up next, and dodges a woman that runs up screaming “Get away from my son!” and swinging a sword seemingly made of ice. “We’re NPC-PS ma’am, please put that sword away and let us explain.”

You look between the sword wielding madwoman and the gun user and decide the gun user is the bigger threat. You try to yank the gun out of his hand with TK, using your left hand to make a grabbing motion as your right hand is currently “holding up” the kid. With your -2 penalty you get an 18, and even spending 5 energy, the man only gets a 12 to hold onto it. It goes flying out of his hands before he even gets a shot off. He glares angrily down at you. Your delay goes up by 8.

Jaden is up, and snaps a kick at the woman’s hand, trying to make her lose her grip on the sword. As a called shot she suffers a -3 and gets a 16. The woman puts 5 energy into COOrdination to try and prevent her from hitting, and rolls a 23 with a smirk. This easily gets the sword out of the way. Jaden follows it up with an off hand action, forcing the woman to twist her hand away again, and again roll a dodge. She doesn’t

spend energy this time, and rolls a 7, while Jaden rolls a 10 even with her -5 penalty (-2 for the off hand action, -3 for the called shot) and hits the hand. The woman now makes a STrength check to hold onto the sword, not rolling much better, an 8. The Narrator plays card 24 on her behalf and rolls again, this time getting a 15, so she holds onto the sword. Jaden's total delay for all that is a 12, while the woman on the defensive goes up by 8.

The kid is up, surprised to see the fairy jumping on him, and shouts "Mom, Dad, it's okay, they just want to talk!" He thinks better of casting something himself, the guy with the gun is still standing right there, and he doesn't want any misunderstandings. He holds.

The man at the window seems to have no problem with casting something though, a magic circle surrounding his son as he does so. His *deferred delay* is a 6, so he'll finish casting then.

However, Rose starts casting on the next segment, and she speeds it up, taking a -4 penalty to her check, but spending 6 energy to make sure she gets it. Getting a 14. The difficulty of Phase is 9, so she and the kid phase out, now unable to be interacted with on a physical level. He is still able to stand on the ground though, it is magic, after all. Her delay rises by 7, and her energy drops to 35.

You feel your Telekinesis on the kid go away, as you can no longer interact with him.

Clayton sees the magic circle around the kid and decides the man is no threat, so turns his attention to the woman. He gets his badge out and holds it up. "We are NPC-PS, put down the sword, right now." As he was holding, his delay is now reset and goes up by 7, his base for the action.

The man finishes casting his own Telekinesis spell, to try and raise his son away from the party, but he can no longer affect his son either, and the spell fizzles. Rose's instinct to protect the boy from physical harm is now working against you.

Rose shouts up to him, "I Phased him so he wouldn't get hurt, not to keep him away from you, sorry!" You aren't sure he hears, she has a tiny voice and he's probably not listening closely right now.

Without having to hold the kid up anymore, you turn your attention to the sword fight. You reach out with your right hand, trying to yank the sword away from the woman. You roll minimum, a 10, while the woman makes her STrength check again with an 11. *AARG!* You think.

Jaden again attacks, taking her -3 to hit the hand, and connects this

time with a 17. The woman fails both her dodge and STrength checks this time, and the sword disappears.

With her weapon gone, she looks over at the badge held by Clayton and seems to register we are all in uniform. She puts her hands over her mouth.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize!”

“Hands on your head!” shouts Clayton.

“Okay, okay, I’m doing it,” says the woman, as she does.

“That’s more like it,” says Clayton. “And what about you sir, any more trouble from your end?”

“No trouble!” he shouts down. “I don’t even know what came over me, or where that gun came from.”

“Narrator,” says Clayton darkly. “Fine. We’re coming up and we can straighten all this out.” He puts his gun back in his inventory, and somehow fails to notice the rifle doesn’t exist anymore.

We march the boy and his mother upstairs, and his father lets us in and introduces himself.

“I’m Kristopher Henrikson,” says the man. He properly introduces his wife by saying “This is Debrah, my wife.” Rather than incorrectly saying “This is my wife, Debrah,” putting the fact that she’s his wife before the fact she’s herself, like so many men would. Some people can be so inconsiderate, but not this guy, no sir! He further goes on to introduce his son as Marcos, and asks what this is all about.

You tell them why you came to New Mexico and ask Marcos what he knows about the spell that caused an entire restaurant to go into hysterics because they thought someone had died.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about man.” he answers, rolling an untrained Deception skill and rolling maximum.

You’re pretty sure if you declare a card usage against an NPC they won’t notice, unlike the NPCs in the hotel earlier, so you declare card 27 and make a mind read check on the kid. You fail by one, you got a twelve, and he got a 13, but Clayton notices and declares the use of his card 2, giving you enough of a boost to succeed. He wants that information too.

The kid is thinking how hilarious the whole thing was, and can’t wait to try another spell out sometime soon.

“Hey,” he shouts, “someone’s reading my mind!”

That’s the drawback to Mind Read, and why you’ve never bothered

to use it up until now. Your “victim” can feel you probing around so it’s really only good for one shot. This time though, it worked out. You speak up. “Yeah, I heard what you were thinking, we know you’re guilty.”

The parents don’t look shocked, in fact they look angry.

“You told me you wouldn’t do it anymore!”

“Wait, you knew about this?” asks Jaden. She looks around to see where Rose has gone. Bored with the conversation already she’s climbed into the large fish tank the couple have and seems to be talking to the fish. Jaden shakes her head.

“We knew he was messing around with Imbuing, his friends all got the idea it would be fun to play pranks on people that way. He told us it had stopped after we found out. I guess it didn’t.”

“I’ll stop now, I promise, don’t seal my magic away! It was just us joking around!”

“Joking around?” asks Clayton. “You know some people got cursed because of you botching the Imbuing, you know.”

“What?” Marcos seems genuinely surprised, and you make an ESP check on him, getting an 11, but ties go to the defender, so you can’t tell his emotions right now. “That must be the ones Hugo worked on. He would never take the extra time to make sure he did it right.”

“I see,” says Clayton. “Now what’s this about sealing powers?” asks Clayton.

“We told him if it didn’t stop, we would have his magic sealed until he was an adult and could handle the responsibility. I guess that’s what we’ll have to do.”

“Please, no! I’ll get so far behind in my studies!” whines Marcos.

“You should have thought about that before you broke your word,” says Kristopher. “You can still practice casting spells, it’s just nothing will happen. Your teachers will be able to tell if you did it right and learned the spell properly, so it’s no big loss.”

“What about his friends?” you ask.

“We’ll talk to their parents, of course, or we can give you the names if you want.”

“We’ll take those names, NPC-PS may want to follow up with you, to make sure everything here is taken care of.”

“Of course. I’m really sorry about all this. We tried to keep it from happening, we really did!” says Debrah.

You try an ESP check on her this time getting a 15 to her 9, so you can feel her sincerity. You nod to the others.

“Fine,” says Clayton. “Let’s have those names and we’ll get out of your hair.”

They give us the names and Rose dries herself off with magic, and we head back to the hotel, it being too late tonight to follow up with the other people.

“I never realized how boring fish are to talk to,” Rose says to Jaden.

“Why’s that?”

“I never tried it before.”

“No, I mean why are they boring to talk to?”

“Would you be an interesting person if you were confined to one room and had a memory that lasted less than a minute?”

“I guess not.”

The next day we set off to visit the parents of the other kids on the list and make sure they did something to stop this magical pranking, but Rose didn’t come with us.

“I’m looking for a magic shop,” she explained. “I might as well spend this extra cash while I have it! It’ll disappear when we get back to base, so I better do it now. I’ll see you all back at the hotel tonight.”

So she fluttered off, and we visited the four people on the list and got them to at least promise to do something about their children’s behavior. One wizard said an Impair Skill item, created by a PC with a high Saturn skill could guarantee they would always fail *Imbuing* checks. Put into some kind of piercing it would be almost impossible to remove until they turned eighteen, solving the problem. Clayton said he didn’t care how they solved it, as long as they did.

Rose came back wearing a tiny copper bracelet, pushed up on one arm. It didn’t seem all that impressive to have bought with unlimited money granted her by a card.

“What did you get?” Jaden asked her.

Rose smiled. “Just a little something to help keep me alive. It was pretty expensive, but what did I care? This makes me *Invulnerable* as long as I wear it, so only magical effects can hurt me. He had to cast a permanent Shrink on it to make it fit me, but it’s perfect now.”

“Nice,” she says, impressed. “If I ever get that card I’ll have to look into something like that.”

We made our way back to base, and with the Wild as Disaster Strikes card that had been played on us, granting us an additional three XP, we received nine total, which was quite a bit for our first mission. Of course some got more because of other cards they had turned in before, but all in all, we were quite happy with how our first mission had turned out.

Chapter 4.1

The Mistake

You are Rose Petal, currently fluttering along with the others.

“Something’s weird,” says Jaden to no one in particular. You’ve waited while Clayton retrieved his guns again and are about to make your way back to the army base that now serves as your home. You look around, and everything seems pretty normal. You are standing in front of the airport building, waiting for your car to arrive. You look back over at her, curious about what she’s talking about.

“I don’t sense anything amiss with ESP,” says Jake, getting a 17 on his check.

“No, I’m right. Look!” Jaden gets out her character sheet and looks at it. “Did I have these cards before? I’m sure I didn’t, what would I do with card 45?”

Everyone, including you, gets out their character sheets and has a look.

“You’re right,” says Clayton. “I’ve got card 31 now, you just spent that one, didn’t you Rose?”

Indeed you had, in the last chapter.

Everyone looks confused, wondering what’s going on.

“So this wasn’t supposed to happen?” asks Jaden. “I thought someone said we would get new cards before our next mission, but we only just got through with this one!”

“It does seem really odd,” says Clayton. “Maybe the Narrator expects something to happen to us before we get back?”

You all ponder this while turning in cards like 13, and as this time Clayton got card 38, he takes back card 35 that Jake got, netting you all (plus the Narrator) two extra cards. Jake whines about getting card 21 again, but you remind him it worked out for him pretty well last time, so what’s he complaining about?

“Anyone want card 43?” asks Clayton. “Most of my major skills are in a skill group, and I don’t have the XP to raise them right now.”

“I’ll trade you for 32 and 36,” you say, “I wouldn’t mind learning a high level spell instantly!”

“You got it,” says Clayton.

“What exactly do we do?” you ask.

“I think it’s already done,” he replies. As you check your sheet, yes, the cards have been shuffled around.

“I don’t shoot stuff,” says Jaden to Clayton, I’ll trade you card 45 for your new 32, it’s more useful to me.”

“Done!”

“Teleportal,” you announce. Everyone looks over at you. “The spell I’m going to learn,” you explain. “I don’t know too much motion magic, so that’s perfect. It’s the grade 10 version of Unicorn’s Tunnel. With it don’t have to cast each end of the tunnel separately, and I can put the portal anywhere I’ve been. I would have a hard time learning that one, being grade 10, as my knowledge is only a four, but with card that’s no longer a concern.”

“Whatever you think is best,” says Jaden.

“I declare the use of card 43 for learning Teleportal.” The card, with Glasses Guy dressed up in a cap and gown, appears and shimmers, then fades away like always. You know a new spell!

“Any ideas about what I should use my card 31 on?” Clayton asks you.

You haven’t forgotten his attitude towards you earlier, but you can’t just tell him nothing. “Have a wizard *Imbue* one of your guns with the Reload spell, it’ll never run out of ammo.”

“Say, that is a good idea. I’ll look into it, thanks. Do you want to try out your new spell to get us back home?”

You think for a moment. “I better not.”

“What? Why?”

“The Narrator gave us those cards for a reason, I think something is going to happen here, that’s the start of our next adventure. He didn’t know I would wind up with card 43, or if I did, that was the spell I would choose. If we go now we’ll miss whatever he had in mind for us here, and that could be worse for us later on.”

“I guess we’ll stick around then. I don’t suppose your Curiosity has anything to do with wanting to see what’s going to happen here?”

“Maybe a little,” you answer.

You have some fun watching all the pretty girls going in and out of the airport, but quickly tire of it and decide you might as well get everyone home with your new spell after all. Knowing this, the Narrator decides he better get things moving. You’re startled to see another fairy

come around the corner, and wave to you.

“Looks like you have a friend,” Jaden remarks. “She kind of reminds me of you.”

You look, and Jaden is right. This fairy is older than you, but still as pretty as you are. Her golden hair is longer than your golden tresses, but her green eyes sparkle just as much as yours do. As she flies up you see you’re exactly the same height and you have exactly the same iridescent dragonfly wings. Who knew there could be such a perfect match for you, it’s like looking at a more mature version of yourself! Oh, the things she could show you. You’re in love!

“Oh thank goodness,” the fairy says, flying up in front of you. “I’m so glad I caught you before you went back to base. You’re all in terrible danger!”

You do a double take. *What?*

“I knew it!” says Jaden. “And once again I’ll probably be no use at all.”

Normally you would try to reassure your long time friend, but with this lovely creature before you, all thoughts of Jaden are gone. You must find out more about this fairy and how she knows to warn you like this.

“Please, you must come with me,” implores the fairy a second time. “If you go back to base a great tragedy will occur. You must believe me.”

You’re ready to follow her anywhere.

“Hold on a minute,” cautions Clayton. “Who exactly are you, and what’s this all about?”

“Why, can’t you tell?” says the fairy, spinning in air. “I’m Rose from the future!”

“Okay, we’ll go with you!” you say.

“Hold on there missy,” says Clayton, grabbing your leg. “Conference time.”

“So is she who she says she is?” asks Clayton softly. You’ve all gathered in a huddle to talk about this revelation, and the future you is hovering out of earshot a ways away.

“There is at least one spell from Saturn, which deals with time, that can send someone to the past or the future. However, she looks a lot older than me, and I don’t think the spell can do more than a couple of months, if that. I don’t know any Saturn spells, so it’s hard to know for sure. There is one way of telling, of course, I just hate to seem all suspi-

cious towards her when she's just trying to help us."

"We did get new cards, maybe it was in case we went back there and something happened?" asks Jaden.

"To PC city? What could threaten that place? It not only has most of the PCs in this area living there, but it's stuffed to the gills with weapons both magical and mundane. It doesn't make sense," says Clayton. "If you can clear this up, go do it."

"It's kind of silly," you protest. "You might think less of me when I do it."

"Just. Do. It."

"Okay, okay." You don't want to set him off again, so you flutter over to your older self, if that's what she is. Will you really look that good when you're older? Fairies don't age the way humans do, but you look really good with longer hair, maybe- You remind yourself to focus on the issue at hand.

"Before we go anywhere with you, I'll need the password," you say.

"The... what?" says the other fairy.

"You know... the password?"

"Wait, you have a password?" asks Jaden. "I don't know about this."

"Of course not, that would defeat the whole point," you answer. "As soon as I learned there was time travel magic I figured I might one day learn it and come back to warn myself about something. But then I thought, what if someone pretends to be me from the future? You know how gullible I am--"

"It is one of your cuter traits."

"Thank you. What was I- Oh, so I wanted a way to identify myself if I ever went back in time." You get your wand out of your inventory and point it at the beautiful but tragically unreal fairy before you. "Which means she is a fraud."

"Oh shoot," says the fairy, "it would be something silly like a password, wouldn't it?" Without further warning, the fairy disappears.

"Did she go invisible?" asks Clayton, getting one of his guns out.

"I don't feel her there anymore," says Jake, getting a 14 on his ESP check. "But I think there's someone invisible over there!" He points.

Suddenly, there's an explosion by the doors to your left, and you get a 14 on your Magical Theory check. You realize it's a Mars spell of Elemental Burst!

Clayton growls, “Come on, there may be people hurt, this fairy thing will have to wait.”

You all rush to the scene, and there are several burned people, the worst one a man being cradled by a woman. His back is terribly scorched and you immediately fly over to him and begin casting Regeneration. You put two extra energy into it and take as long as you can, which still isn't even more than a few seconds, and cast the spell successfully. You got a 13 on your LUCK check, so he's still alive, and begins regenerating every 10 segments. The woman holding him is weeping and thanking you. “He just jumped in front of me,” she says, “I don't even know him.”

“When he's healed, see if he has five new XP, maybe the Narrator took pity on you and played card 26. Then ask him to dinner.”

“I will,” she says, relieved. “I really will.”

Actually, what would it mean for an NPC to XP like that?

Once he's healed you check the others, they are not as serious. Jake has been looking after them with Healing Acceleration, and some other wizards came running, so it seems no one is in danger of dying. You do a couple of castings of Elemental Conjunction from Neptune to get some water and put out some fires. Clayton calls headquarters to get a clean up crew down here and start taking statements. NPCs start popping in with Teleportation, and soon everything is under control again.

“Told you I wouldn't be any help,” says Jaden. “I better get to punch somebody soon, this is ridiculous.”

Chapter 4.2

The Mistake

You are Jaden, back at the base with the others and your CO, about to punch someone.

“So it was some kind of *Illusion*?” you ask.

“Yes. Someone, probably made invisible through magic, cast an *Illusion* spell to try and trick us into going with them. They would have needed to see the *Illusion* to make it respond to us, so that’s who Jake probably felt when it went away. Then they set off the fire trap they had put over the door earlier, thinking we would run to deal with that, and they were right.”

“You did the right thing,” says Sergeant Draughon. “But you’ll have to be extra careful from now on, especially you, Rose. I don’t know if that was targeted at you specifically or not, but it seems you have an enemy already.”

“One thing in our favor,” says Jake, “Magical illusions can’t be touched. If it was an ESPer doing this, they could make us feel like we touched the *Illusion*, so it wouldn’t be given away. If you think something’s up, touch it and be sure.”

“Or point it out to me,” says Rose. “I can use Magic Sense to see if something is a spell or not. Unlike ESP I have to turn it on, it doesn’t just activate when something weird is going on.”

“So we have strategies, but they’ll probably try something completely different next time. We need to find out more about why we were targeted.”

“I leave that to you,” says Draughon. “We wanted to give you time to spend your XP, so we didn’t plan another mission for you right away. Use the time as you will. Good luck.”

He leaves the room, and everyone looks around.

“What do we do now?” asks Jake.

“I don’t know,” you answer, then look over at Rose. “We’ll have to see if Rose remembers anyone from her past that might try to hurt her like this.”

Rose looks bored. “I don’t. I’ve been with you most of my life remember? Do you think I should grow my hair out more?” she asks.

“I thought you said doing that would interfere with your flying?”

“I could wear it in a bun when I was flying.”

“Yes, I guess you could.”

“Do I really look that pretty?”

You look down. “Yeah,” you mutter, coloring.

“As important as discussions about hair and what your LOOKs are,” says Clayton, “perhaps we should be focusing on finding information about powerful wizards? Not to mention one or more PCs that have some kind of grudge against NPC-PS or us in general.”

“Actually, you’re the computer expert of the group, aren’t you? Shouldn’t you be the one doing that?”

“Oh. I- uh. I guess you’re right. I’m going to go look into getting my gun spelled, then get on that. See you all later.” He walks out.

“Nice one Jaden!” says Rose, giggling. “I’m going to see what sort of magic they have available now that I have some XP to spend. I’ll see you later Jaden.”

“I guess that just leaves us,” you say to Jake. He gives a start. “What? Oh, yes, I suppose Rose has a point, we should get started spending that XP. I want to up Compulsion, that seems really useful. I just have a bad feeling about all this. And with me, that means a little more than most. Stay alert, okay?”

You nod. “See you later.”

And then he’s gone too. You are ready for the next mission but you can’t deny the others the chance to improve themselves, so you’re going to have a long wait until you’re needed again. Maybe you’ll go home? You check your character sheet, yes, close combat, martial arts, off-hand, style analysis and energy boost are all part of a skill group, and you need 27 XP to raise everything to a 9. Maybe in two adventures you’ll have enough? You sigh, this is not exactly how you pictured being a PC. At least you didn’t mess the others up, which will probably happen sometime later.

Chapter 5.1

Second Mission

You are still Jaden, because the Narrator feels you haven't been given a chance to really shine yet, and hopes to rectify that in this chapter.

In the two weeks that pass you learn Clayton is in the same boat as you. Figuratively speaking, as neither of you has ever been on a boat. Maybe a better metaphor would be you both have the same cat in the bag? *No*, you think to yourself, *that's just silly*. In any case, he can't raise his major skill group either, so he reads mission reports and pokes around the NPC-PS database for clues. Meanwhile, a wizard works on *Imbuing* his favorite gun with the Reload spell, costing him his card 31. With nothing much else to do, you join him, but neither of you has the Research skill. Rolling that untrained you actually hinder his investigation, getting a total of a six. Whoops. Maybe you should have spent some of that XP after all? Being a martial artist hasn't done much for you thus far, perhaps it's time to start broadening your skill set?

In any case, when you are called in for your next mission, Clayton has nothing good to report about anyone wanting to abduct people. Nor has your mystery assailant tried again. It's a pity really, if he had rolled higher he might have realized the article he skimmed over about a PC being found dead several weeks ago was relevant. But he didn't. And so he proceeds with the rest of the party, in ignorance. Rose has picked up the Armor of Magic spell, and Jake was true to his word, raising his skill group from a 1 to a 3 in that time.

"Your next mission will take you to Hispaniola, the Dominican Republic half, to the east," says Draughton. "There's a human trafficking ring we want you to find and break up. It's been active since a few months ago, and it's been keeping one step ahead of the local authorities. Or it's possible they just don't care. Either way the local police asked us for some help. Here's your plane tickets for the journey there, I assume you'll just use Teleportal to return. We didn't book you passage back, if that's okay."

"That's fine," says Rose.

"You'll leave tomorrow, here's everything we know about the situation." He hands out a thin packet of papers, and takes his leave.

You all look over the packet. Rose doesn't bother, choosing instead to amuse herself with Creation magic. She keeps coming up with various imagined objects that seem to be more artwork than functional.

There isn't a lot of information to be had, unfortunately, just that the group seems to be recently formed, and has been doing some abducting of people in the area. It wouldn't have been noticed, but apparently the daughter of a wealthy individual had been missing for several days. This is how the local authorities got their first notion that something bigger was going on. That of course drove the group deeper underground, again figuratively, they are not mole-men, and thus harder to catch.

You are to meet up with the local law enforcement and see where that leads you, using your various abilities as PCs to crack the case. You hope you can crack something other than the case this time, like a head or two. It isn't that you're hopelessly violent or anything like that. You have a certain skill set and want to utilize it. That's all, and there's nothing wrong with that.

In the morning you have another boring flight, and arrive at Bonao, near the middle of the island. Technically the plane landed in Santo Domingo, then your group rented a car and drove to Bonao, which took about an hour. You head into the local police station, and ask for the man you are supposed to contact. You show your badge to the person at the desk, and he buzzes you in.

"Oh, thank you for coming down so quickly!" says a portly man in a uniform, rising from his chair to meet you. He introduces himself as Rafael José, and leads you further into the station, down into the holding cell area.

"There's a man we're holding here you should speak to," says Rafael.

"You caught someone related to this case?" asks Clayton excitedly.

"No, no, is nothing like that. This is a homeless man who demanded our protection. He says two people he knows have gone missing from the streets, so he wants to stay here until this whole thing blows over."

"And why are we talking to him?"

"He says he watched someone being abducted with his own eyes!"

Obviously the man's eyes were not used to abduct someone, he means he saw with his own eyes someone being abducted.

“Wait,” you say. “A homeless person? How can that be? Isn’t he average, like everyone else? Certainly he should be able to get a job somewhere.”

“I guess you’ve lived a rather sheltered life, no offense,” says Rafael, shaking his head. “You don’t realize what it’s like being an NPC.”

You must reasonably admit that to be true. Your parents are wealthy, and you went to the best schools and were rather sheltered because of it.

“It all comes down to weaknesses,” says Jake, sadly. “What does he have, Destitute?”

The cop looks away. “I would not presume to look at another man’s character sheet sir, not even a man like this. But if I had to guess, then perhaps that is the case. He could also have a high point value Enemy, or perhaps a large Indebted weakness he’s trying to run away from. It is sort of random the backgrounds and weaknesses we get, after all. Even being average, some people can deal with what they get better than others.”

“That’s stupid!” says Rose, standing up on your shoulder so she can stomp her tiny foot, in that cute little way you like. “It’s up to the Narrator to determine an NPC’s weaknesses, just don’t give those out.”

“But then we might not have gotten this information,” says Clayton.

“Wait, you’re going to say that this poor guy deserves to live on the street his whole life, just because our adventure needed someone to talk with to get it rolling? That can’t be fair.”

“Why is it fair we got to be PCs and he didn’t?” asks Jake.

She stiffens. “We worked harder, or something, right?” She looks at each of us in turn, but no one has an answer for her.

“I am just a detective,” says Rafael, spreading his hands. “I think you want to talk to a priest about that one.”

“No, I want to give the Narrator a piece of my mind, is what I want to do.”

“Please, not here, I don’t want the station to be swallowed by an earthquake or something the moment you leave because you’ve made the Narrator angry. Just talk to this man and go, all right?”

“Now see what you did?” you whisper to Rose.

“It’s just not fair.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, sorry.”

We come to a man wearing tattered clothes, laying on the bench in an open cell.

“Hey Enrique, the people are here to see you.”

He slowly sits up. “You’re going to give me something for my information, right?”

You notice Clayton’s hands twitching like he wants to draw his guns and give this man “something.”

“What would you like?” he says, tightly.

“I don’t know, what can you offer?”

“How about some new clothes?” asks Rose, wrinkling her nose.

He considers it. “Okay.”

Rose zips around him, getting a feel for his dimensions, and starts casting a spell. Meanwhile, Clayton is questioning him.

“What happened?”

“Well, it was nighttime,” the man begins, “a few days ago. A buddy of mine and me were sitting in an alley when up drives this white van. Two fellows jump out and grab him. Now, the thing that saved me was that it was my turn to go dumpster diving, so I kinda smelled a little bad. They ran over to grab me too, but then decided against it. They hopped back in the van and took off.”

Clayton looks over at Jake, who shakes his head. “I got a seven on my ESP check,” he whispers, “so I have no clue if he’s being truthful. Sorry.”

“Hate being starting characters,” he mutters to himself. “Guess we’ll have to check it out ourselves. Can you at least tell us what alley it was?”

“Nah, I’m Illiterate, I don’t know what street I was on.”

“Oh great,” says Clayton. “This has just been really helpful.”

“There’s one other thing I can try, if you’ll allow me?” Jake asks the man, reaching for him.

“Whatever.”

“I’m not very good at this, it’s what I was raising these past two weeks, so...” he trails off. “At least it was less than a week ago,” Jake says, getting an eleven on his *Postcognition* check. He concentrates for a while, then turns back to us.

“Okay, I’ve got it. I can take us there, for all the good it’ll do us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Unless Rose has picked up or knows some divination spells?” he pauses, and Rose shakes her head, not interrupting the magic she’s

doing. “Okay. I don’t know Seeing, which again wouldn’t be that useful anyway. I would say ‘Okay I see they have a red clock on the wall,’” he intones. “Then you would say ‘Yeah, so what?’ See the problem? ESP won’t help, I’ve got nothing.”

“We’ve got a place to start, and that’s something. You know anything else?” he demands of the man, who shakes his head.

We wait for Rose, who has finished creating a shirt with her Creation magic, and suddenly a pair of pants appears out of nowhere. Both are seamless and plain, but tough looking.

“Let’s go,” she says.

“Thanks,” says the man.

You all head back upstairs.

“Sorry he wasn’t more help,” says Rafael. “I figured it was something like this, but he wouldn’t tell me, of course. Oh well, he’s not getting in trouble on the street when he’s in here. If there’s anything the department can do to help, let me know.”

“I’ll need a map of the area, he glanced at a street sign. I saw a restaurant nearby, so I should at least be able to figure out where that white truck was. Too bad it was too dark for him to see the license plate number.”

He pulls up a map and uses the street view to find the alley the man was talking about. “I don’t suppose you know about what time this was?” Rafael asks Jake.

“He doesn’t have a watch, and he didn’t look at any clocks. That restaurant though, it closed after dark. It isn’t Big Chain Restaurant that’s open 24 hours. So it might have been maybe two hours after it closed? Why?”

“Traffic cameras,” answers Rafael. “If we can catch a glimpse of that van we might be able to see where it went, or where it was going. I’ll get some people on it if you want to wait.”

“See,” you say to Clayton. “Maybe it wasn’t a waste of time coming here.”

“We’ll see,” he grumbles.

“This can’t be right,” says Rafael, typing madly away on his keyboard. “Someone’s been tampering with the system.”

“What’s wrong?” asks Clayton.

“They’re gone. All the footage from that night and in that area has somehow been wiped out. We’re going to have to do a security audit,

we've obviously been breached!"

"Do you mind if I go have a look around?" Clayton asks, pointing to his data port.

"Be my guest, I have to go notify our cyber security division. I knew we should have paid for a PC to program our firewalls, rather than just someone average."

He storms off, and Clayton plugs a cable from Rafael's computer into his head, and sits down, going slack.

"Give someone ten bucks to draw a mustache on his face," says Rose, to no one in particular.

Chapter 5.2

Second Mission

You are now virtual Clayton, inside cyberspace.

“Are you there, Scindo?” you ask your Agent.

“I am always at your beck and call,” replies Scindo, who would be pleased to be finally introduced, if he had emotions. Which he doesn’t, being only a semi-intelligent computer program that lives in your head and helps you hack things. He does, however, look like a humanoid raccoon carrying a large bag, and a variety of tools hang from a belt at his waist. He doesn’t appear in any one place for more than a few seconds, randomly blurring from one spot to the next in rapid succession, and always looking around nervously. You have been fitted with what’s called a *Netwalker*, which gives a physical structure to the computer system in this building, and allows you to walk around it like any other physical space.

“We need to check and see if we can find any trace of the footage Rafael said was erased.”

“Whatever you say.”

You look around the virtual environment here, it looks like a prison network, with bars covering everything interesting. Scindo streaks back to you, “Yes, there’s a gap, come and look.”

You follow behind him, to a building which looks like it had the front all smashed in. You squeeze in past the ruined bars and enter the “structure,” which appears to be a sort of data vault. Small drawers line the walls, each marked with a date and time. You see several drawers missing, and realize that, yes, the data is gone.

“Let’s see what we can find out,” you command Scindo, and get to work with a Hacking check. Scindo, being better at this than you, starts poking around with his tools, and you assist him, getting a measly 8+4. (The +4 being the bonus for Netwalking at the time) You add a +2 to his check of 24. With a 26, what the Narrator would deem a success for a “Very Difficult Task,” you don’t find the footage, but you do find something better. A trail leading back to the source of the attack. You quickly follow it, realizing whoever did this was no NPC, their skill was too high. *Not high enough*, you think.

You track it back to a machine and now stand in front of a foreboding castle, with a high door and iron portcullis barring your way. Of course this is just a virtual representation of what you're up against, not anything physical. You nod to Scindo to get to work, and he gets out his tools, trying to hack past the locks that control this door. Again you assist, adding another +2 to his 19, but this time you are actively working against this person's firewalls. As they are only slightly better than average they get a 7 to resist you, because they rolled minimum. Lucky!

You both slip inside and take a look around. The place is pretty clean, probably purchased for this job and then will be destroyed when it's over, to not leave evidence lying around. At least, that's what you would do. You stay still and watch for activity in the machine, but there doesn't seem to be any. Scindo is trying to look every which way at once, bouncing back and forth within a few feet of himself. You decide the owner isn't paying attention at the moment.

"Come on," you whisper, mainly for effect, and make your way up a set of stairs to a tower. You both hack the window, easily turning on the system's camera without alerting the internal defenses of the "castle" and peer out of now the open window.

The computer seems to be in a warehouse someplace, and four people are sitting around a table playing cards, while a fifth seat sits empty. They all seem bored and are not talking about anything interesting at the moment. You do however see a group of people of all ages who are not bored. They are all tied together and can't stop fearfully looking around.

Bingo.

Now you just have to figure out where the heck you are... where this computer is, to be more precise. There aren't any windows you can see out of from your vantage point, they're too far away. Wait, what did that guy say?

"Yeah, no problem."

"And you cleaned it out?"

"Of course. They looked in it, said it was fine. Don't worry so much."

"I have to worry, you don't worry enough!"

They all laughed.

Oh, they were talking about the truck, you realize. They must have rented it to do the abducting and brought it back because they didn't need it anymore. This is both good news and something to be concerned

about. If you can find where they rented it from, Jake might be able to use his power and figure out where it went. On the other hand if they've brought it back that must mean they're about to move on. If you don't catch them tonight you won't.

You pull out of that system and move back into awareness of your body, waking up. You don't bother checking a mirror, no one would be foolish enough to mess with you while you were out.

Right?

Chapter 5.3

Second Mission

You do not realize you have been anyone but Jaden.

Clayton wakes up with a concerned look on his face, and unplugs himself from the computer.

“I’ve got good news and bad news,” he says. He relates what he learned and Rafael, now returned, says this is good news. There aren’t too many places in this city to rent a white van matching the description given by Enrique. You can check them all in a couple of hours. He frantically rushes off to tell his team to start calling the local places to get them to hold all white vans matching that description. He comes back with a list of places you need to go. Clayton looks at the map and the addresses, and announces his CPU has solved this “traveling salesman” problem, whatever that is, and he can direct you all there in the shortest possible time. Go him, you suppose.

Wait, why do we have to do all the work? Couldn’t some NPC officers also pitch in?

It takes several tries, four to be exact, for Jake’s LUCK to catch up with the plot and roll high enough to get a result. This means it’s the fourth place you stop at that has the exact trick you’re looking for. Touching it, Jake tries out Postcognition again, getting a 17 this time. This is easily enough to see where the truck has been the last few days, which is lucky, given that’s your only lead right now. Who knows what you all would have done if he had gotten a bad roll on that check. He tells you where the warehouse is it stopped at repeatedly, and you all head off. It’s getting dark by this time, so you hope you’re not too late.

Clayton explains there are probably five people there that need to be taken out. The group ponders the choice of waiting for more backup, in the form of the local police, or just going now and taking them.

“You can’t kill any of them!” Rose says firmly.

“If they shoot at us, I’m shooting back,” says Clayton, a bit more firmly.

“No. They deserve the chance to atone for the wrong they did,” she answers, a bit more firmly than that.

“Maybe you should stay behind if it’s going to bother you that

much.” The firmness is ratcheted up a little more.

“Maybe you should.” The very air is starting to firm now.

“Don’t tell me you have Won’t Kill,” groans Clayton.

“I certainly do. I’m a creature of nature, aren’t I? Animals kill for food, and that’s fine. Unless you’re going to eat those people you kill—”

“Okay, fine, I’ll aim for their legs or something, honestly.” Clayton rolls his eyes. And his eyes were replaced with cybernetic ones, so that’s quite the feat.

“You promise?”

“Yes, unless I have no other choice.”

“I’ll be watching you. I declare, card 23, nobody dies.”

“I just hope one of *us* doesn’t because of your foolishness.”

“Foolishness?”

“Just leave it,” you say, taking one of Rose’s soft little hands in your two fingers. “I’m sure it’ll work out.”

“Humph. It better.”

Arriving on the scene, Rose has cast Darksight on everyone and Armor of Magic on you. She is now at a total penalty of -3 to everything for *maintaining that magic*. If it’s light enough she’ll drop the Darksight, but it’s now after sundown and the warehouse probably isn’t lit on the outside. Jake parks the car a few blocks away, and you make your way to the building as quietly as you all can. Clayton has his guns out, and Rose has faded to invisibility, but you heard her whisper “good luck” to you and plant a little kiss on your cheek, so she’s around someplace.

“There are five of them,” she whispers to you as you get closer. “My Detect Enemies spell says that, anyway.”

The others nod, they heard. Approaching the warehouse you see a truck, loaded with a cargo container, sticking into the building. Light spills out through the crack between them. Everyone fails to notice the man standing quite boldly on top of the container and watching you all interestedly, as you think you are sneaking closer unseen. He is using the ESPer ability *Masking* and as everyone got an eleven or lower to notice him, and he rolled a thirteen on his check, he remained hidden.

Until, that is, Jake’s ESP goes off and he puts a hand up to stop you all. “There’s an ESPer using a power around here!” he whispers, and lights go on all around you.

“What took you so long?” asks the man on top of the truck, whom you now see is holding a very nasty looking gun. “I expected you like an

hour ago. Did you get lost?”

Smiling men, four of them, are stepping out from behind crates and things stacked around the space, and all but one are carrying handguns.

“You’re not the only ESPer in the world, you know,” says the man. “Now if you all could just put up your hands? Or would you prefer to roll initiative?”

You look around, unsure what to do. You are seeing in color again, meaning Rose has dropped the Darksight spell in order to do something else, which you hope happens soon. You hesitantly start putting your hands up, to buy her the time she needs. Of course if Jake wanted to do something with Telekinesis, you wouldn’t complain. You wish you had some kind of long range attack, like some sort of energy blast, yeah, that would be the ticket.

“Hang on,” says a voice in your ear, “I complete the tunnel!” Rose becomes visible for a split second as a magic circle appears under your feet, and she has her wand held high.

“See ya!” she says.

You find yourself falling, your amazing REFlexes allowing you to reorient immediately as you’ve just traveled through Unicorn’s Tunnel and into the warehouse by the door. You catch Jake and Clayton by the shirt and steady them, while the voices shout from outside, “Find them!”

The portal on the wall closes, and you look around. You’re by the truck, which is full of tied up people, and there’s a small gap to the left of it. To the right is a door, which the goons will probably bust through any second. Clayton throws you a knife from his inventory and points to the people in the truck.

“Get them mobile, we’ll hold them off!”

You spring into the truck and start hacking into the ropes holding the first person you come to. You hear the door bang open and a voice shout, “They’re in here!”

Now you all roll initiative.

Chapter 5.4

Second Mission

*You are now only yourself, the Observer,
so that you may properly view the battle*

Jaden, the goon on the truck and the goon with no gun go first, and Jaden spends an action hacking at the rope tying the nearest person's hands together. You notice the guy on top of the truck dropping down to the left, and out of sight. The goon with no gun begins casting something, he'll be done in five segments. Not yet in combat, both Jaden and the ESPer delay their base of 7.

Rose is up, she sees goon1 at the door and starts to smirk, but he's raising his gun to fire. She makes a free action Magic Combat check to see if he'll go before or after her action. She gets a twelve and he gets an eight to mask his intent, which of course fails. She knows they will act together, and puts extra energy into her Mercury spell of Immobilize, trying to cast it instantly. She rolls a fifteen minus one for her Armor of Magic, making his arms jerk to his sides as bands of force wrap around him. This makes his shot go wild, at the very least. He makes a STrength check to bust out, putting in his maximum energy, and gets a 19, shaking free of the spell.

"I declare, card 7," shouts Jake, causing a card with glasses guy giving a thumbs up to shimmer and disappear, and suddenly the bands are back around goon one, and he's helpless. "Good thinking, Rose," he says. "We've got no cover here, him shooting us would be a disaster!"

The Narrator plays card 44 on Rose in retaliation for all this, and her delay increases by a total of seventeen. She thinks she's been distracted by the complement and looks away, murmuring something. Goon1 took a shot and is basically out of the combat thanks to the card, so we don't have to worry about his delay anymore. Goon2 leaps over the container he was hiding behind and runs for the door. Goon1 is hidden behind it, but he saw magical lights over there so he knows something is going on.

Jake uses TK to fling Goon1 further into the room, so the door can close, getting a 22 and smashing him into the table behind the group, dazing him. The door swings closed. His delay raises by eight. At the

same time, Clayton yells “I declare, card 45.” Now he doesn’t have to reload either of his guns or keep track of the ammo he uses. The Narrator gives a nod, because that saves him some work. He starts shooting at the door with both guns, discouraging others from getting curious and opening it again. His delay rises by 6.

Goon3 has a magical circle around him, and sees his wizard buddy looking at him, so he knows it’s a friendly spell. He at the very least goes over to the wizard so he can be told what the spell is when it’s done being cast.

Which is now: the spell goes off, and the wizard gets a seventeen on casting Invulnerability on Goon3, pulling it off easily and telling Goon3 he’s now immune to bullets. His delay rises by seven.

Jaden makes a perception check as the ESPer sneaks up behind her, about to clock her in the head with the back of his rifle. This counts as the Club skill, which the Narrator says he doesn’t have, who but a caveman would? So he rolls that untrained, getting a ten, two maximum rolls in a row. He then takes a minus three because of the called shot, still enough to hit, and bashes into her head. What he doesn’t know is that Jaden is protected by Rose’s Armor of Magic spell, and there’s a flash as the weapon bounces off. She whirls around, now ready to strike, as her action was to cut through the rope holding this person’s feet. She has let go of the knife in surprise, and is now facing the ESPerGoon. She is now in close combat, her delay rises by four, his by 8.

Clayton continues firing at the doors, guns akimbo. He seems to be grinning and enjoying himself immensely. The door is already dead, so he doesn’t have to worry about Rose nagging him later. The sound his guns make is a staccato rhythm in time with his heartbeat and anyone looking at him right now would no doubt think to themselves: “Now there’s a man that loves what he does.”

Goon2 holds his action, as he sees bullets joyfully trying to tear the door to pieces, and thinks how nice it would be if that wasn’t him. He does briefly wonder how many bullets that guy was carrying in those little guns.

Goon3 then acts, striding over to the door and brashly yanking it open, bullets bouncing off his Invulnerable body. He thinks this must be how a certain red caped super hero must feel, and readies his gun to fire. His delay rises by 8 for the moment by the door opening.

Goon2 stops holding and dodges behind Goon3, using him as a human shield, and fires a burst of three shots from his pistol into the

warehouse. He sees two people there and a fairy, so he tries to hit each of them, taking a minus three penalty to his action. He gets a twelve, meaning Clayton and Jake both take a bullet. Clayton takes five damage to the body, and Jake takes it in the right arm for one, just a scratch. Rose wishes she could do something about it, but is still under the effects of card 44, and will be for some time.

Jake doesn't want to get shot again, he didn't want to be shot in the first place, really. He targets both of their guns with TK and spends maximum energy, getting a twenty-three. Both goons spend max energy on their STRENGTH check to hold onto them, Goon2 getting an eighteen and Goon3 getting a twenty-three. One gun goes sailing, the other stays right where it is. Goon2 shakes his fist at Jake, that was his favorite gun!

Jaden launches a flurry of Kung Fu blows at ESPerGoon, who tries to block them with a Barrier. She rolls a twenty-four to hit him, while the barrier rating is a sixteen, so she punches right through it and into him. She hits his body for thirteen damage, bringing him one into gone, and he collapses. Another four delay for her, and it's the WizardGoon's turn again.

He thinks for a second about what spell would be good in this situation, and realizes the NPCs are probably going to be mopped up with no trouble. He selfishly decides to flee the scene. He starts casting Teleportation, which will be done in eight segments. This is too bad for our heroes, if he was to be caught now he could tell them everything, which of course we can't allow just yet, now can we?

Clayton meanwhile has seen the effect his bullets are having on Goon3 and before he fires again says "I declare, card 10," having been handed it somehow by Jaden, and shoots. His bullets pass through a card with a knight on it that has a sword sticking out of his chest. As he knows Rose would want it this way, he does a called shot to the legs of both Goon2 and Goon3. He fires two bullets from his right hand at Goon2 and two at Goon3 from his left. Oddly enough, both take 11 damage to one leg, and both cry out in surprise. Goon3 crying the louder as he now believes his wizard companion has abandoned him. He does not know the wizard has done no such thing, but that does not stop him from swearing vengeance on the wizard. This leads to Goon3's untimely death some years later through an unrelated incident involving a kitchen accident. Everyone agreed it would have been quite humorous, were it not for the tragic death that was the result, of course.

Jaden goes back to cutting rope, after kicking the ESPerGoon's gun away from him. She also calls him a nasty name or two which somehow gets lost in the sound of gunfire, cries of pain, and laughter on the part of Clayton. Maybe when she's calmed down a little we'll come back and check on her...

Goon2, now having lost his weapon and almost having his leg shot off now wishes to retreat, and grabs the door to hold himself up as he hobbles away. He sees the wizard casting something and the circle is right at the wizard's feet. He smiles, thinking the magic is about to take hold and make those NPC-PS guys pay for what they've done! We know he couldn't be more wrong.

Jake is unsure if Goon3's Invulnerability has worn off or not, but he does know one thing- Invulnerable things can hurt themselves. He grabs Goon3's hand (the one not holding a gun) with TK and slams it into his nearly ruined leg. He gets an eighteen minus three for the called shot, while Goon3 gets a thirteen to resist, and his hand slams into his leg. Because Jake used two energy to increase his RESolve to a 10, this does lethal damage, but only one. It's rather fortunate that's all he needed to do, and Goon3 crumples to the ground, his leg useless. It now occurs to Jake that Goon3 doesn't need his leg to fire, he's still holding a gun. Whoops. Luckily, Rose is finally over her card induced pause, and again casts Immobilize, this time spending maximum energy because she's at a minus three because of the other spells she's maintaining. She gets an eleven, barely enough to cast the spell. Goon3 busts out with a thirteen, spending maximum energy and taking a minus five penalty for being prone.

The wizard outside finishes casting and disappears, making Goon2 think he has just gone Invisible. This is because Goon2 is only of average intelligence and honestly doesn't suspect the wizard would run off in the middle of a fight. He hauls himself to one side so the (now departed) wizard can get through. "Go get them!" he exclaims to empty air. Poor Goon2, he's going to be *soooo surprised* when he finds out.

Meanwhile, Clayton shouts over to Goon3, "Drop it, you know you can't win against us by yourself!" and holds his action. Goon3 thinks for a moment and drops his gun, defeated.

Chapter 5.5

Second Mission

You are Rose, cleaning up the mess these meatheads made with all their pow-powing

The Goons are now tied up with regular rope and are covered by Clayton, while you maintain the Regeneration spell that is healing them.

“And why are we healing them?” asks Clayton.

“Because I won’t have them bleeding to death on account of your shooting them up,” you say, 20% cutely and 80% angrily.

“Fine, whatever. I’ll call what’s his name and get some squad cars over here so these guys can be taken in.”

“Don’t bother with that, we’ll just use magic!” you say, your cuteness overtaking your anger by 40%.

Once you’re sure no-one is dying you let go of all magic and start casting Teleportal, right into one of the cells you saw at the police station. A hole in the air appears, facing down into the cell, so when they get shoved in there they can’t just jump back out and make trouble. You fly through and go talk to Enrique, telling him to go get Rafael, you’ll be sending him the people responsible momentarily. Enrique jumps up and runs to get someone, and you fly back through.

“Dump them in,” you say cheerfully. “We’ll be seeing you!”

The party shoves the four through the portal and you make it wink out, now in a mostly empty warehouse. Jaden has finished freeing everyone, but as they are homeless they’re just hanging around, not having anywhere to go anyway.

“Don’t touch anything,” roars Clayton. “We need to gather evidence from this site so those guys can be tried.”

“They already tried,” said one tired looking man. “Tried to abduct us.”

“I realize that. You know what I mean!”

He starts talking on the phone, probably with Rafael, and walks over to you and asks if you can make another portal to just outside the station. You, of course, can, and do so.

Police officers swarm the place, taking statements from people,

photographs, and hooking the laptop up to a small generator so a forensics team can look through it before the battery dies. Standard procedure. Rafael comes over to thank you.

“I just wish we could do more for these people. We’ll send them to the homeless shelter in town, they’ve been through a lot.”

You can’t help agreeing.

You’ve noticed Jake looking around like he’s looking for something, and fly over to him.

“What’s wrong?” you ask, concerned. “The case is closed, let’s go home?” you suggest.

“No, there’s something we’re missing,” he says, hesitantly.

“We stopped the people from taking these guys away, and we caught the bad guys so they can’t do it again. What more can we do?”

“I don’t know, but my ESP tells me we shouldn’t leave yet. Has anyone else noticed anything else strange?”

The others shake their heads. “Well, there was the one thing,” says Jaden. “Come with me.”

She leads you into the cargo container, which is pretty bare. There’s a long black bench the people were sitting on, running the length of the left side, and a chemical toilet stuck in the right corner.

“Looks like they were going to be loaded onto a ship and sent someplace,” remarks Clayton. “This is a shipping container for boats, after all. What’s the matter with it?”

“Doesn’t it feel colder than it should be?”

“I... guess?” hedges Clayton, looking around.

“Do you guys hear something?” you ask, fluttering the length of the container. “Like a small electric motor?”

Jake puts his hand on the bench, which is a black square of metal running the length of the container, and listens. However, he jerks his hand off right away.

“This metal is really cold!” he remarks, feeling it again.

Everyone gathers around, and Clayton knocks on it with his metal arms. It makes a hollow sort of thump, not sounding solid at all. Everyone looks, but there doesn’t seem to be any seam or opening that you can see.

“Magic time!” you exclaim, “good thing I still have some energy left.”

You cast Darksight and Phase on yourself, then pass through the

metal. What you see surprises you- a young human girl inside a block of ice! Turning, you see there's a vent blowing cold air into this compartment, keeping it frozen. "Well now," you exclaim. "What have we here?"

You carefully cast Unicorn's Tunnel at one end of the chamber and phase your way back out again. Dropping Darksight and Phase you complete the tunnel and ask Jake to please use TK to slide the block of ice out, which he does. The frozen girl lands with a thud, and everyone's eyes go wide when they see what's inside.

"Is she alive?" asks Jaden, kneeling beside the block.

"I think so," replies Jake, "It's hard to tell, actually."

You do a Magic Sense on her, getting a thirteen. "This is magical!" you exclaim, further getting a fourteen on Magical Theory. That's enough to let you know this is the Freeze spell. "Once out of the ice she'll recover, I'm sure of it!"

Chapter 6.1

Her Story

You are Belquis, about to be woken from your icy slumber

Your existence is pain. Not long ago you watched in horror as, after being yanked from your home, presumably by magic, ice started covering your body. You were afraid, and panic took you over, but it was no use. The ice was too strong and you believed you were dying. Now, suddenly, you are breathing again, and every inch of you is pins and needles. Blankets are wrapped around you, and through blurry eyes you see several people crowded around you, while a too bright fire burns nearby. You groan, and close your eyes again.

“I think she’s coming out of it,” says a squeaky high voice.

“Will she be okay?” says another.

“After she warms up we’ll ask her,” says a third.

You’re among friends, you hear inside your head. Don’t try to move too much until you feel up to it, we don’t know how long you were in that ice.

Slowly you warm, and finally you’re able to move again, and someone carefully helps you sit up. You look around. There are three people and a fairy hovering around you, one with metal arms, and two that look normal. His arms look a little worn, you wonder if he’s been neglecting his scheduled maintenance. This would be unfortunate, arms like that don’t come cheap, and making sure they are in top shape is cheaper in the long run than letting them break down and need complete replacement. Your lizard brain wonders if this is the best time to be pondering such issues, and the rest agrees it probably isn’t, and goes back into overdrive. A hundred questions scabble to the surface of your brain, each claiming importance over the others.

“Are you going to kill me?” you ask shakily, looking at the guns carried by the cyborg.

“No, these are what I used to rescue you,” he answers, failing to put them away like a civilized person would do in the presence of a lady. Of course you’re just a kid, but it’s the same thing, isn’t it? “Why were you in that ice?”

“Give her a minute, Clayton,” says the boy standing next to him.

“Take your time,” says the fairy. “I’m Rose, what’s your name?”

“I’m Belquis. You rescued me?”

They all nod.

“Where am I?”

“A warehouse in Bonao,” says the girl. “I’m Jaden, I’m glad to see you’re all right. This is Jake. You are all right, aren’t you?”

As the cold has left you, normal feeling has returned to you, and you nod. “Yes, I think I’ll be fine.”

“How old are you?” asks Clayton.

“I’m twelve. If you’ve rescued me, can I go home now?”

“In a while, honey,” says Jaden. “We need to understand why you were in the ice like that. Can you tell us anything?”

You shake your head. “I was just playing outside when suddenly this magic circle appeared and scooped me up. I was in a dark room and I couldn’t see anything. Then all of a sudden the ice went around me and I couldn’t break free and I was so scared and I couldn’t breathe and I thought I would die and it was so cold and I wanted my mom and I tried to break free and I even put energy into STRENGTH but I’m just a little girl so it wasn’t enough-” You’re crying, you don’t understand why this had to happen to you, and who these scary people are, and you just want to go home.

“Easy now, easy!” says Jaden, hugging you. “You’re safe now. We took care of those people that stole you away, they’re in jail now. We’ll take you back to your parents soon, okay?”

You really have no choice but to trust them, even though these could be the very people that kidnapped you and are trying in some way to trick you. You decide to bide your time like any reasonable person and try to escape if you get the opportunity. Then a thought strikes you, and you wish you could feel if there’s a bump, but this weird girl is still hugging you. Which you probably think is supposed to try and help you feel better but-

“Are you PCs like me?” you ask.

“You’re a PC?” asks Scary Gun Guy, looking at you with what is probably his default expression. Annoyance.

You nod, and Jaden draws back. “My LOOKS and PERSONALITY are higher than average. My parents want me to be an actress when I grow up, when I’m done having adventures and all that.”

“I’m sure you do just fine,” says Jaden happily.

“Oh no, I’m rebelling against cultural norms. I’m going to be put-

ting my XP into raising my MANipulation, KNOWledge and REASON. Then I'll go back to school and study to become a cyberneticist, which is really my main passion. Helping people live better lives through advanced technology."

Jaden doesn't seem to know exactly how to respond to this statement, so she chooses to ignore it, which you suppose you can't help. "Let's get you back to the police station so we can have your parents pick you up. At the same time you can give your statement to the police and then go home. How does that sound?"

You nod, maybe these people are okay after all.

Jaden helps you up, and the fairy spends almost ten seconds casting a spell, and a hole appears in the air in front of you. Interestingly, you can see a police station through it, or at least the best facsimile of one you've ever seen.

"It's okay, come on!" says the fairy, fluttering through it. You step through.

"Belquis?" a voice says as everyone else comes through the hole. It seems to ripple a little, and if you had been looking, you would have seen Rose grow concerned as it steadied out. But you weren't, you were looking for who was talking. "Is that you?"

You look around, and there's a policeman standing there, looking at you. You nod.

"Your parents have been so worried about you! They'll be glad to know you're safe. Where have you been?"

"In the ice," you say, trying to be helpful. He just looks confused.

"We'll tell you the whole story later, right now can you give her parents a call?"

The officer walks away and another one comes up to the group.

"Nicely done," he says, obviously impressed. "You NPC-PS people don't mess around. First a little gift of the perpetrators, gift wrapped and delivered right into a cell, then you rescue Marcial's daughter not twenty minutes later."

NPC-PS? you think. You notice they are all wearing uniforms. Nice of them to inform you, it would have smoothed things over in your mind considerably. If you had believed them, of course. But you're so pretty and nice hardly anyone tries to deceive you, at least that you've caught them at.

"Where did you find her?" the officer goes on.

"In the transport unit, frozen inside a Freeze spell," explains the

fairy, Rose.

“A freeze spell?” says the officer, looking down at you. “How you would like some Hot Chocolate?”

“If it’s not too much trouble,” you answer, trying to look as cute as possible and getting a sixteen on your Persuasion check. (You do only have a 2 in the skill) Still, that’s enough he would probably do anything in the world for you if you asked.

You are brought into a room that looks suspiciously like an interrogation room, if you were a suspicious person, and you happily sip Hot Chocolate and relate your tale. Now getting into the roll of the Helpless Damsel In Distress, you are happy to tell your story. You’ve put at least some points into your Acting skill, to satisfy your parents’ wishes. Even if they think being a cyberneticist is a foolish dream for a little girl, you will not give up your dream for anyone. They listen attentively, and soon enough your parents arrive and make an adequate fuss over you, and thank the nice people from NPC-PS. Even the scary guy gets thanked for saving you. Your parents are properly horrified when they learn their daughter spent the last several days as an ice cube, but are in some ways relieved it wasn’t worse. Which it could easily have been, but the Narrator would never go that far as to truly torment a little girl, would he? You resolve to re-examine your beliefs at some later time, after you have been properly doted over, which is your due. You thank everyone and go off with your parents, your part in this story complete.

Chapter 6.2

Her Story

You are Clayton, beginning to Get The Picture.

“So let me get this straight,” you say, after discussing it with the others. You’ve also clarified things with the four people now awaiting trial, so you have a pretty good idea of what happened. “First of all, this wizard guy uses the magic of Telesummon to grab Belquis from out of her house. She finds herself inside an abandoned house and gets Frozen, putting her in suspended animation. He then loads her onto a truck and puts her into the freezer. He does this extremely round about thing because...” You point to Rose.

“Because Teleport magic could be traced. However, if he’s made himself some sort of object that prevents magical spying on him, he himself wouldn’t be traceable,” she answers.

“That’s how we knew where she had gone to,” adds Rafael, “we had that magic performed and it led us to the house. That’s where we lost the trail.”

“But what I don’t understand is why her treatment and the other’s was so different. The other kidnappers didn’t even know she was there, as far as your magics can tell. Right?”

“That’s right, we questioned them every which way, but they all said the same thing. They knew nothing about a little girl in that compartment. Unless they were made to forget, but that’s a lot of trouble to take.”

“Okay, what about her being a PC? Maybe he thought she would be a bigger problem than the others? But she was so young, she probably has *stat penalties* still. Is she some crazy talent ESPer or a magic user or something?”

“Not according to her parents.”

“So why take her at all? Her parents are loaded, but there was no ransom note, she was just frozen. So it can’t have been for money. Do we know where that container was going?”

Rafael shook his head. “The ESPer said he was going to make the shipmaster load the container and take it to where it needed to be. However he used Memory Alteration on himself so he’s now forgotten the

address. I almost wish you had waited to attack them until they arrived, that way we might have gotten a look at who was going to pick them up.”

“Shoot, you’re right. Sorry about that, we’re still pretty new at all this.”

He shrugged. “Better to be safe than sorry, I guess. For all we know the wizard would have Teleported her off the boat before they even got to their destination, once he was sure he couldn’t be traced.”

“You don’t suppose he was acting alone, do you?” Jaden asks.

“In what sense?”

“He takes advantage of his knowledge they would be transporting people and arranged some separate deal with someone else for her. Do her parents have enemies?”

“No, we checked that. Neither one has the Enemies weakness. She didn’t either, according to them. I guess anything’s possible at this point. Until you find that wizard and ask him directly, we can only guess.”

“By the way, what keeps that wizard from just grabbing her again?” you ask.

“I recommended to them a wizard I know who’s average at Imbuing. Not an NPC, her stats are a bit weird. They’re going to buy her some sort of object with Planer Hold on it, so she can’t be Telesummoned away again.”

“Good plan.”

“I recommended a piercing of some kind, which they didn’t seem too happy about, but Belquis seemed intrigued. That’s really the only way to make sure she won’t take it off at a critical moment, and keep it hidden.”

“Imbuing huh?” you ask, an interesting idea seeming to form in your mind.

“Can we go now?” asks Rose.

“You’ll let NPC-PS know if anything else surfaces on the laptop or they decide to remember something else?”

“Of course,” answers Rafael. “And thank you, all of you. I know you’re just doing your jobs and this sort of stuff is probably nothing to you guys, but we appreciate it.”

Everyone assures him it was nothing, fulfilling the social contract, and Rose does her thing to open a hole in the air for you to get home through. As it closes you lean over to ask her something.

“Hey Rose?”

“Yeah?” she edges away from you a little. Guess she still isn’t comfortable around you.

“You can Imbue any object, right?”

“I don’t know Imbuing,” she lied, having a 6 rating it in. “It takes a long time, I don’t have the patience for it.” That much was accurate, anyway.

“I mean any object can be Imbued.”

“Yes. Why?”

“I was thinking, what about one of my cyber arms? Like make it shoot fire or something. That would be cool.”

“They’d have to detach it while they worked. I don’t really know, cybernetics and magic don’t really get along very well. I’ll look into it for you, if you want.”

“You would do that for me? Thanks!”

“Yeah, it’s okay.”

You make your way to your room, you need to write up a full report. That can wait until the morning. It’s been a busy day, and you’re tired!

Chapter 7.1

Learning Things

You are Rose, and you are not sure if Clayton is going to like what you have to say.

“I’m not sure you’re going to like what I have to say,” you say to Clayton the next afternoon. As promised, you looked into Imbuing magic onto one of his cyber limbs, more because of your Curiosity than wanting to do him any favors. “I’ve got good news and bad news.”

He gets out a coin. “Okay, heads for good news, tails for bad.” He flips it with a flourish, can’t the man make a simple decision without resorting to these sorts of methods? Humans... “Heads! Give me the good news.”

“Well, the good news is we found out before we wasted a bunch of time, money and effort trying it.”

“So it’s not possible then?” He looks disappointed.

“The bad news is also kind of good.”

Now he just looks confused. “You’re making less sense than usual.”

“Magic is making less sense than usual. Let me start at the beginning.”

“Please.”

“Basically, your cybernetics interfere with both ESP powers and magic both directed at you, or used by you if you had those backgrounds.”

“Wait, I’m resistant to magic because of my cyber limbs?”

You nod. “Apparently, just having a small cybernetic implant installed gives you a plus two bonus for resisting both types of powers. For every ten points you take after that, it’s another plus one.”

“Not that I’m complaining, but why?”

“I guess because you’re technically less alive? Or there’s some kind of interference because of the body/machine interface? It’s not really clear, but it’s been observed, so I have no reason to doubt the people that told me. Go ask the Creator when you see him. All I know for sure is that people with a lot of cybernetics tend to make wizards spells backfire more often than not, and play havoc with ESP abilities too.”

“With all the stuff in my skull it should add up quick, even though I’m not a full body replacement or anything. Sweet!”

“No, it’s not. Don’t you see? If you get hurt, I have a huge penalty to healing you with magic. I can’t cover you with Illusion, or give you armor of magic, or anything. So yes, if an enemy wizard tries casting a spell at you alone, you’re set. But you can’t just turn it off if you want to.”

“Oh.” He considered. “So that’s why turning one of my arms into a magical item is out too?”

“Exactly. As an object, sure, if you wanted or were even able to detach it in the field, it would suddenly be an Imbued item. But plugged into you, it’s got electricity and whatnot going through it, plus your life force or whatever I guess creeps into it. Then it takes the penalty again. So it might work, but you’d need a PC to do the imbuing, not an NPC because they couldn’t roll high enough.”

“That’s why that hole in space rippled when I walked through it!”

“Yeah, one minor mystery solved, I’ll have to be careful of that in the future. Wouldn’t want it to collapse when you went through it. I didn’t realize it at the time, healing you back at the warehouse because I’m so great at magic, but there is a danger there, so we’ll have to be careful in the future.”

“Yeah, good to know.” He seems a little freaked out. “And they didn’t tell us about this when they got us together because...”

“There isn’t a lot of research in this area, mostly magic users stick to their own, while cyborgs do their thing, you know how that goes.”

“Discrimination.”

“Yeah. If I were a religious girl I might also blame it on a Narrator oversight, after thinking of the idea and getting it shot down by the Creator. He needed a reason, and that was it.”

“But you’re not?”

“Not as such. It might also explain why it was never mentioned before this. Maybe it was forgotten, but now he’s realized it and so he’s making sure it comes up. Anyway, we’re actually one of the most varied party of adventures in recent history, so the vibe I get in the halls is that something big is coming for us to handle.”

“Something that needs all of our different skills, you mean?”

“That’s it. Well, I’m off. Hope you’re not too disappointed!”

“See you later. Thanks for looking into it for me.”

You flutter away, giving a wave behind you, bored with this con-

versation and wondering where Jaden is.

You check the obvious place: the gym. Oddly, she's not there.

You check your room. Not there. Bathroom? Nope. Running laps? Eating in the mess hall? Checking out cute technicians working on planes at the airfield? (You don't mind if she looks, as long as she points them out so you can look too) Classrooms? Guard Station, signed out to go into town? You find her in none of these places.

Too bad you didn't activate your Detect Enemies spell while you were hurriedly flying from place to place. You might have noticed the person taking more than a passing interest in you as you flew between buildings. But you didn't, and thus like the sky your ignorance remains wide and unbroken.

With increasing desperation you head over to the ESPer classroom and find Jake. You ask him if he can track her down.

"Sure thing," he says, pulling out a cell phone. "Can't you carry one of these?" he asks, puzzled, shaking it. "With a shrink spell on it, I mean."

Oh. You hadn't thought of that. You've never really been separated from her for very long, maybe it's time to look into something like that? He calls her and tells you where she is.

"She's where?" you ask, thinking you didn't hear that properly.

He tells you again.

You shake your head, there must be some mistake.

You flutter over to a building you've largely ignored, and slip in through an open window. Books surround you, and you hear the quiet conversation of people scattered about the place. *Why is Jaden in a library*, you ask yourself. You don't need the Curiosity weakness to feel the need to find out.

"It's all the fault of that girl we rescued," she explains, books piled around her. You see a variety of subjects displayed, from avionics to cybernetics, textbooks and technical manuals, mostly. "When she said she wasn't going to let her stats define her future, I started thinking about mine. Did I just want to keep studying Kung Fu forever? I haven't been all that useful to the team yet, and maybe I should trust the Narrator that he has a plan for me. I want to do more, even if I probably won't be any good at it."

"I'm sure you can be," you say, knowing she has Insecure. "So what are you thinking of learning?"

“Making stuff,” she says proudly. “After all, we’re on an army base, they have labs and equipment, and if I’m making stuff to take on missions, they’ll even pay for it. They do want us to come back safe, after all. Stuff I custom make for myself is going to be better than stuff made by NPCs, which will only be average, right? I could just buy stuff, or check it out of the armory, but most of that stuff is NPC made. Average, but not great. I don’t think they’ll have a problem with me making gadgets for the field that I use on missions. Especially because I’d have to leave them when my term of service is complete, so others can check them out after I leave. I’m thinking of breaking up my combat skill group, I already have 10s in Close Combat, Off-hand and Style Analysis, thanks to my Aptitude and Prodigy. I wouldn’t mind getting my Martial Arts a little higher, just to make worthwhile all those combat based background I have, then start putting XP into electronics and robotics! I mean I’m already as fast as humanly possible in close combat. I can’t be faster, so let’s hit a little more accurately and then see how I can help the team in other ways!”

She seems quite excited by this, more so than you’ve seen her in past months, so you’re pretty happy for her. You even see a way to be near her while she’s working.

“That’s great,” you say, getting a little excited yourself. “Maybe I’ll pick up the planet Saturn and learn the Augment Skill spell, that would certainly help with making stuff, right?”

“You would do that for me?”

“Sure, why not? It would come in handy otherwise. I don’t have to learn a separate spell for each skill, so no matter what you needed to do, it would help!”

“I think you’re right! Thanks, Rose.”

“Sure,” you say, looking around. “Now if you can just get me down a book on Saturn magic, we can both get started!”

You both pour over your respective tomes, this being a metaphor for studying, rather than being literally about liquids, when suddenly you have a thought.

“Wait a second.”

“Yes?” says Jaden, looking up.

“You’ve trained in martial arts to the peak of physical perfection, right?”

“And slightly beyond, thanks to my backgrounds, why?”

“Now you want to learn how to make *gadgets*?”

“Is that a problem?”

“I just don’t want to see you running around in tights, with a cowl and a bat shaped cape, that’s all.”

Jaden thought for a second, then started laughing. “Oh wow, you’re right! I didn’t even think of it that way. Wow.” You join her in laughing until someone shushes you.

Another two weeks pass, and you get your Saturn rating up to a 3. This means any skill you specify when you cast it gets a +3 bonus. After that you study and easily pick up the level five spell Augment Skill. Jaden busies herself learning Electronics, taking a class and learning to solder, how to run wires, how current flows through chips, that sort of thing. Boring! You check in on her from time to time, and in the course of the two weeks she gets her rating up to a 4.

Sergeant Draughon seems pleased by Jaden’s choice of gadget making, he says often times PCs into that kind of thing don’t have the physical stats to be deployed in the field. Her combination of making and refining her gadgets combined with her fighting skills should be a real asset to the team. He apologizes though, he can’t give her any more time even though she still has XP to spend, another mission has come up, so it’s time for us to move out again.

Chapter 8.1

Escort Mission

You are Jake, and you've been doing really interesting stuff too, honest!

“Do any of you have History?” asks Draughon at your next meeting. “What do you know about Syria?”

You do, but you only get a six. Clayton makes a face, obviously he rolled even less. The others just sake their heads.

“Okay then,” he says, looking about. “Suffice it to say it’s never been a really stable place, government wise. Most “elections” are one candidate, unopposed, and there was a time when it was under martial law for like fifty years. All that seems to be changing for the better, however, as they have finally decided to have a real election, with two people running instead of just one. Of course will the choice between two self serving power mad people really help the country? Who knows? All I know is that one of the candidates wants protection, as threats have been made against his life. He wants to go out campaigning, but he’s afraid of the consequences if he gets killed. As a true election is a baby step in the right direction, our government has offered, to be frank, some people they can spare. That’s you guys. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not a slight against you or anything. You’ve done good work so far but a bodyguard mission isn’t exactly what most PCs have in mind. As you’re the newest group, you get it. There is a twist to this case, though.”

Everyone is following him so far, so he continues.

“He wants to know who, exactly, is making these threats. Of course he suspects his political rival, but he has no proof. Your task is to safeguard him, and when he’s attacked, follow them back to their hideout and figure out who they’re working for. How you accomplish all of this is up to you of course, just so long as he stays safe. Here’s the man you’ll be protecting, Dhul Fiqar,” he says, sliding a picture across the table.

He’s probably in his late 40s, balding, a bit pudgy, average looking, like all NPCs. “You’ll be meeting him at the Mezze Air Base, and you’ll be going by military transport this time, so you don’t need tickets. It’s not exactly undercover, but you won’t be in uniform. We want them to try something and if they know we’re in the area, they might call it off. Which would be fine, but that would require you to stay there until the

election, which is a month and a half away.”

Rose groans.

“I know. Hopefully it won’t come to that. You’ll be following his itinerary when you get there, so that’s really all I have for you. Good luck.”

Everyone looks over their new cards, you have card 19. *Not that I would use that one*, you think. Clayton turns in two, for three XP, everyone else keeps theirs. Turns out Jaden gets the extra cash this time, she wonders what she can buy before the adventure is over, and says she’s going to keep an eye out. That card seems to be a popular one. No Rallies this time though.

The next day you all leave, and make your way to the Mezze airport, where you are met by Dhul and his two bodyguards. They stepped in front of him and looked the group over, and didn’t seem all that impressed.

“You’ll forgive us,” the one on the left says.

“But this is Mr. Figar’s orders,” the one on the right finishes.

Rose was riding Jaden’s shoulder, and I was up front, with Clayton behind me. The two men charge forward, obviously intending to strike us, so we rolled initiative.

Having rolled highest you figure you should just end this here and now, and fling your hands up to catch both of them with Telekinesis. You get a 17 and fling them both back at the same time, the looks of determination on their faces giving way to surprise. They go hurtling back past Mr. Figar, landing roughly several meters away. Jaden pouts a little that she didn’t get to have any fun, and Clayton steps up next to me.

“Is that really necessary?” he asks, his hands twitching like he wants to have a gun in them.

“I suppose you’ll do,” says Dhul, looking at you and ignoring the question. “What about you?” he sneers at Jaden. Her face lights up, possibly thinking she’ll have some fun after all. She gestures at him and looks at Rose. “Regeneration, please,” she says sweetly, gesturing at him. “Certainly,” answers Rose, getting out her wand and waving it about. A circle appears around Dhul and disappears, causing him to look down at himself.

“What was that for?” he asks roughly.

“I would hate to accidentally kill you,” she replies sweetly, taking

a circle step forward and unleashing a flurry of blows towards his pudgy midsection. You can see she's holding back, but he still staggers under the ministrations of her pile-driver massage. He also goes down. The two bodyguards try to rise, but you didn't let your Telekinesis go, so they're still pinned to the ground like butterflies in a display case. Jaden watches as the Regeneration catches up to Dhul and heals him, and he gets unsteadily to his feet.

"You've proven your point. Guess that just leaves you."

"I thought you'd never ask!" Clayton says, pleased, and Quick Draws his weapon, getting a 15 so it's in his hand instantly. He sights along the barrel at a nearby sign, and squeezes off three or four clips worth of ammo without reloading. Most hit the sign and twang off, throwing little sparks all over the place, and he finally finishes. There's a smiley face carved into the sign now, made of bullet holes.

"Uh..." Dhul seems a little lost for words now. "How many bullets do you have in that little gun anyway?"

"A whole crate-full," he answers. "Thanks for reminding me." He pulls out his cell phone and dials a number. We hear his half of the conversation.

"Hey, it's me. Can you dump some more in?"

"No trouble, just showing off."

"They aren't that expensive."

"Just do it. Thanks." He puts the phone away.

"What was that about?" asks Dhul.

"I have an ammo crate with my name on it in my room. Any bullet in it is understood to be mine."

He nods, he knows about magic. "You can let them up now, I'm satisfied," he says to you. You flourish your hands, and the force smashing them into the runway is released, and they get up. "I do apologize about that, but I really did have to be sure they sent someone competent. I want this election to succeed, but I can't do that if I'm dead." He holds out a hand.

"We understand," you say, shaking it. You all introduce yourselves, and he leads you to a car which will take you to the campaign area where he's staying. You of course stay extra alert now, you're on the clock, after all. You don't let him get into the car without doing a Postcognition on it for the last few minutes. You wouldn't want to get blown up by a recently placed explosive, after all. Also, once in the car you immediately suggest a Premonition check on his person, to see if you can determine if an

attack will be happening soon. He has no problem with that, but you do apologize that you are not yet a master of this skill. Being that there are so many skills for an ESPer to learn, it's hard to master them all without years of XP expenditure. He understands, and says to proceed.

You get a 17, almost maximum, and know that an attempt will be made on his life in three days.

“And you say you haven't mastered that skill?”

“I just rolled well, that's all.”

“Still, is there any indication of what form this will take?”

“I can try narrowing it down, just a second.”

You try again, but only get an 11 this time, and shake your head. “I can't, sorry.”

“Don't worry about it. At least we can be extra careful three days from now!”

Dhul had a busy schedule the next several days, with radio, tv and web appearances at various times. On the third day, however, he planned to be walking door to door and meeting people, which must be significant, you think. That night after dinner you're watching his room while he showered next door, and the others were with you.

“Why don't we just change his schedule?” asks Rose. “We know it'll happen when he's out talking to people, so let's just keep him from doing that!”

“No good,” said Clayton. “We need to figure out who's threatening him, remember? If we change the schedule, whoever it is will change theirs, and we won't have any idea what they're planning.”

“Oh, I guess you're right.”

“Plus,” you put in, “how do we know that changing the schedule wouldn't put him in more danger? Maybe going one way he gets shot and lives, but going another a wall falls on him and he dies.”

“I guess your looking into the future isn't perfect, is it?”

You shake your head. “The future isn't fixed. At that moment he was in danger three days from then. But if someone randomly decides to do something different, it'll change. Naturally I'll check him every morning, but I can't be sure that's foolproof either. So I wouldn't relax.”

“We'll have to take turns guarding him at night. I'm sure his regular bodyguards will help, so it won't be too bad.”

“We should still come up with some plans in case the third day is

the key, we don't want to mess up our chance," says Jaden.

"He'll be walking around outside," says Clayton. "If I were them, just shooting him from a passing car is what I would do. Quick, neat, and you can drive away right afterwards."

"I suppose I could loan him my bracelet," says Rose, indicating the band of metal on her forearm. "He could wear it and be Invulnerable."

"No, I think we're going to have to risk a little more than that," says Clayton. "How would you do that anyway, it's so tiny."

"I can get bigger," she explains. "It's part of my fairy magic. I could grow to human size, take it off, then when he gave it back to me I would get bigger again, put it back on, then shrink again."

"Interesting. Have to remember you can do that. But I have something different in mind. How would you feel about maintaining Regeneration and Armor of Magic on him while he's outside?"

Rose thought for a bit. "I suppose I could ask the magic to remain while he walks about outside and is in danger of death. Magic is kind of funny like that- if I knew the fly spell and wanted to let someone fly around the world, the magic would stay until they did it. As long as I maintained it, anyway. But ask it to get you to the store, and as soon as you're there, poof, it's gone, no matter how much you wanted to maintain it. It should be okay, though. Why risk it though?"

"Some shots need to hit him, and as long as you don't cast Armor of Magic too well, they will. Him having Regeneration should cover the rest. The thing is they need to think he's dead so they report in, thus we can find out who they're working for."

"That means this whole plan depends on you, Rose," you say. "Think you're up to it?"

"I- I guess? Maintaining two spells like that, Regeneration is a grade seven spell you know? That's a minus four to everything I do while I've got them going."

"I'm glad it's not me," says Jaden. "I know I would mess it up."

"When they- if they show up in a car and start shooting, you can fly under it and hold onto something. Tail them to wherever and find a place to hide. Even with a minus four that shouldn't be too hard. Then drop those spells and open a portal to where we were at the time of the attack, and we'll come back you up. You can stay invisible as long as you want, right?"

"Yes. Until I attack or call attention to myself. Okay, I hope this works out!"

Chapter 8.2

Escort Mission

You are Rose, more nervous than you were the first time you and Jaden- never mind.

The next three days pass quickly, even you don't have time to get too bored, this Dhul guy keeps a tight schedule. You do get in trouble a couple of times because of your curiosity. You're always getting into things like recording equipment, to see how it works. Jake checks up on him every morning, and you remember to cast your new spell of Augment Skill on him before he does, which helps. You learn his opponent is doing similar things, making appearances to try and win this election. Soon three days have passed, and Jake announces that yes, the future hasn't changed, and today will be the day. Sadly he only gets a 12, even with the help of your spell, so he still doesn't know how it will happen. You cast Regeneration and Armor of Magic on him, making sure he understands the risks. A lucky shot to the head will still kill him, if it does enough damage all at once. He understands, and you all head out into the neighborhood to watch over him.

It's about two in the afternoon when you're on. A black van pulls up and three men open the side doors and spray bullets at Dhul. You seize the chance and fly through the open door, settling on the floor, which is much more comfortable than riding around on the bottom of the thing. They close the doors and take off, and you hear shots ringing out, probably from Clayton putting on a show for them, as you discussed. Several minutes later you feel the spells end, the conditions for the magic now having been fulfilled, he must now be out of danger. You sigh in relief, not only because you're no longer at a penalty, but that also means he survived. If he hadn't, the spells would have ended right away. You listen to the men in this van, they seem to think they have succeeded, and seem to be just normal NPCs, with no magic or ESPer powers to speak of. You're getting bored just riding on the floor when the vehicle stops and they all pile out. You zip out and see you're just by the side of a road, and another car stops and picks them all up. Apparently they're abandoning the van. You again zip in through the door when it opens,

and settle yourself in the very back. They report success in killing Dhul and the driver says he'll head back to the hideout.

"Are you sure they can't trace us with magic or something?" asks one of them nervously.

"How could they? None of us touched the bullets, the van was stolen and will just lead them where we dumped it. There are all kinds of crimes that don't get solved, right? We were in and out, so stop worrying."

They should start worrying, you think, these guys don't know much about magic. Most people don't, of course, just like they don't know much about what fairies can do. Only someone that can cast spells learns about what types of magic there are, and what it can do. These ignorant louts are in for a big surprise when a Jupiter spell fingers them all for the murder. Of course there's no need for anyone to do that, because you're on the case. Now if only they would get there, but you realize they're probably trying to throw off any pursuit, taking a winding path back to their base. Finally a long time later, too long, they stop and get out, getting on a large boat with a bunch of other guys and heading out into the water. That might complicate things, you think, hanging onto a railing and watching the shore disappear behind you.

"Why are we on this boat again?" asks the nervous guy.

"Because some tracking spells stop when they hit water," says a guy you don't recognize. "Come on." They go below, and you follow.

They stick together, and there are now eight men here, total, and they start telling each other what happened. Both seem to think they've killed a presidential candidate, and none of them seems to need to report to anyone the job is done. They just congratulate each other on a job well done, and argue how long to stay out here in the Mediterranean. A bunch of them start playing cards and smoking, because that's the stereotypical thing for guys like this to do, and even they have to keep up appearances. You didn't expect them to turn on cartoons, did you? You realize it's time to call in the others and make some plans.

You find a quiet spot that looks big enough for three people, probably an unused bunk, and quietly open a portal leading back to the neighborhood you left, and then have to slam it shut again. You feel you've made opposed LUCk checks with someone here, and you got an eleven but that person got a fifteen. A siren noise was heard for a second because some idiot has obviously called the cops. They've left the siren running

on the car outside where you put the other end of the portal! Or maybe it was just an ambulance passing or something. Two men scramble into the room, looking for the source of the noise, and you make sure you're still invisible, and flatten yourself against the wall. They look past you and go to check the rest of the ship, grumbling. That was a close one. What now?

You decide to just wait a few minutes and hope that siren is gone, so you try to calm yourself, because your tiny little heart is going pitter patter at a most alarming speed right now. You open the portal again, and this time your LUCK check is much better, and there's no noise at all. You flutter through and look around for the others, then see them and motion them to come over. You belatedly realize you're still invisible, but they've seen the portal and run over to it, looking through.

"Looks like a boat," says Clayton, drawing his guns out of his inventory.

You become visible again. "It is a boat, now come through and keep your voice down, they heard that siren before so they're all riled up!"

The others nod and step through, and you collapse the portal again.

"What are we up against?" whispers Jaden.

"There's eight people on this ship," you whisper back. "The four we saw dumped the van and got in a car. That car took them to this boat, and they went out into the water. They didn't report to anyone, and the other four people seem to believe they've killed the other candidate."

"They did," Jake says sadly. "We heard about it on the radio while waiting for you. I guess his protection wasn't as good as what we did."

"Oh no!" you softly cry. "This is terrible!"

Jake nods. "Let's see if we can take these guys out and get to the bottom of this."

"No killing," you say fiercely.

"No killing," sighs Clayton. "If it'll make you happy."

"I have an idea anyway," you say. "Does anyone here have card 30?"

Everyone shakes their head. "I'll be happy to give you my card 29 if you want to play it as a 30," says Jaden. "What do you have in mind?"

"Spending a ton of energy, taking a huge penalty, and using Immobilize on the ones playing cards. There's more than half of them right

there, if they're still there playing."

"Good notion!" says Clayton. "They'll no doubt raise an alarm, but if we spread out and take them all somewhat simultaneously, there won't be a thing they can do about it! Sweet!"

You nod, then close your eyes, calling upon your Detect Enemies spell. "There is a large group of them clumped together," you begin. "There are three others apart from that group. One very close over there," you point. "Two more that way."

"Interesting how that worked out, one for each of us?" asks Jake.

"Probably coincidence," Jaden says.

"Okay, give us a little while," Clayton says to you. "If there's a clock or something, three minutes, this boat isn't that big, right?"

You shake your head.

"Okay. We'll wait on you, the signal will be a lot of shouting and cursing."

The others nod, and each decide on a direction to go. You become invisible again, after taking Jaden's card 29, and make your way back up to the card game. Your luck holds, all 5 are still lounging around, totally oblivious to the magical prison each will soon individually enjoy. You try to gauge three minutes, you don't want your friends to be discovered but wait too long and they might, so you figure you've waited long enough and get out your wand. You're hiding behind some stack up beer cans, and decide to put your plan into action.

"I declare," you whisper softly, "card 29 as card 30." A card appears, with what looks like a giant asterisk on it, and then morphs into the girl with black hair, an aura of power surrounding her. It disappears and you know you can now spend any amount of energy you wish until these guys are taken care of. So you put twenty five energy into your casting check, more than half you have left, and taking the additional five penalty for instantly casting the spell. You are rewarded with a thirty-one result. There's no possible way anyone in this room can succeed at resisting the spell but you are shocked to see that you have mysteriously failed the casting check! Curses! The Narrator has played a card on you, that's the only explanation! You hastily use another card and hope he somehow doesn't counter this as well: "I declare, card 25!" Another card appears, this time with the guy in the trench coat, with XXs for eyes, and a rewind symbol next to him. Your casting check goes off again.

The joke's on the Narrator, you rolled maximum that time, a thirty seven, and bands of force successfully wrap around all six of the men,

holding them rigid and causing them to shout in alarm. You hear assorted thumps and a couple of shots ring out, but you decide to stay here in case they start trying to wiggle somewhere. *I hope my friends come through okay. Be safe, Jaden.* You are now visible behind the cans, and one of the men spots you, and calls you out to the others.

“What are you doing you little piece of %\$*)(@% fairy?” growls one guy.

You aren’t sure what he called you, the Narrator must be censoring things around here.

“Go play your tricks on someone else, if you leave right now maybe we won’t kill you,” says another. All of them are struggling against their bonds.

“Give it up boys, none of you are my type, and I think your three friends will be joining us soon, but not in the way you might think.”

“I’ll @!^&#\$% kill you!” says another, and again his words are slightly unclear. You suppose it’s too much to ask that these stereotypical bad man refrain from using stereotypically bad language.

You hear a thumping noise, and Jaden comes into view, dragging another man behind her.

“I couldn’t lift him,” she says cheerfully. “I hope he’s not too badly bruised from being dragged here.” She was of course lying about that part. She drops his legs. “Everything under control here?”

“Sure thing!” you answer, while another guy says “Another #\$(@*! I’ll &\$#%&@! kill you both when I get out of these bonds!”

“What did he say?” asks Jaden, cocking her head to the side.

“Just ignore them.”

A body floats into view, with Jake following close behind, and gets dumped on top of the one Jaden brought. “Everything seems good here. Clayton isn’t back?”

“And who the #\$(@ are you?” shouts someone. “What are you doing on this %\$*)(@% boat?”

Jake looks slightly offended. “Don’t you know a silence spell or something?”

You shake your head. “You better go check on-”

“No need,” says Clayton, emerging with his guy at gunpoint. The man is bleeding from several shallow wounds, and glowers at all of you.

“Isn’t this a nice little scene?” Clayton asks, requesting politely the guy kneel by bashing his legs out from under him.

“Go \$*(& yourself!” says one of the men.

Clayton walks over and puts the gun to the man’s forehead. “What did you say to me?”

The man’s eyes go wide. “I’m sorry!”

“You better be, he has Bad Tempered,” you say.

“And the only reason you’re all still alive is the fairy doesn’t like me killing stuff. Me, I figure we only need one of you to tell the story, so that’s all I would have taken back with me. The rest would have been killed resisting arrest.”

“Arrest?” says one. “You’re cops? I thought this was some kind of holdup!”

“You *wished* it was that,” clarifies Jake, “Allow me to introduce myself. Jake Beachamp, NPC-PS. All of you are under arrest for the attempted murder of Dhul Fiqar and the murder of the other candidate, what’s his face.”

“You don’t have any proof of that!” yells one guy, totally not realizing only guilty people say stuff like that. Innocent people say things like “That’s not true” or “There must be some mistake,” things like that.

“Actually we do,” says Jaden. “Rose here tailed you guys from the scene of the crime, and I’m sure some truth magic or an ESPer meld will tell us everything we need to know.”

“*#\$\$@,” one says.

“Yes indeed,” says Jaden. “Now shut up, because you have the right to remain blessedly silent. Everything you say will be used against you in court. You can have an attorney, though it won’t help. Maybe if you confess it’ll go a little easier on you. But I doubt it.” She turns to you. “Do you still have enough energy to get these bozos out of here?”

You nod, and start opening another portal. You open the portal into the holding cells back at the base, may as well let them deal with these guys awhile.

“You can’t take us out of the country!” says one guy in desperation.

“What country?” says Clayton. “You’re in the water now my friend. And I’m not sure who owns this particular patch of sea, do you?”

The man just glowers.

“I thought so. Jake, if you don’t mind doing the honors?”

“Not at all,” he answers, and starts tossing the men through with Telekinesis. The one conscious man steps through on his own accord, whining about medical attention or something, like he deserved it.

You close the portal after they're all through and start casting another one to get yourselves out of there.

"Wait," says Jake. "We need to take the boat back, it could be stolen too for all we know."

You stop casting. "Oh, okay. I don't mind resting a little, I don't have much energy left. I'm going to go look at the sea awhile then," you say.

"I'll come with you!" says Jaden brightly. "We deserve a break, after all."

"Shouldn't at least some of us head back to keep protecting Dhul? We are supposedly professionals, after all."

"Why? We took care of the threat, right? Jake didn't say 'there will be two attempts on your life in three days hence' he said there would be one. And they thought he was dead anyway, so until it's announced he's not, no one's going to try again."

"I guess you're right," he says. "Go on."

She goes up the stairs with you, starting to tell you about how she knocked the guy out.

"So, you do you know how to drive this boat, right?" you hear Clayton say to Jake.

"Me? I thought you did!"

"What? You were the one to suggest taking it back."

Jaden stops. "Wait, neither of you knows how to pilot this boat?"

"Maybe it's computerized, and I can just plug into it someplace?" Clayton says, unsure.

"Just a second, seems like I have to do everything around here." You get your wand out again, then cast Augment Skill on Jake, for the skill "boating."

"Ooooh," says Jake. "I think between the two of us we can figure something out. What an amazing spell..."

You just shake your head.

After a while the boat seems to lurch forward and slowly turn back towards land, while you and Jaden stand at the bow and look out over the water.

"It's really pretty here," she breathes.

"Yeah, I wish we could come here at sunset. It must be something."

"Well, you've seen the place? Maybe some evening you can open a

portal here, just the two of us, with an inflatable chair? Then after we've watched the sunset, the Breathe Water spell of yours goes on us both, Tirelessness goes on you so you can be human size indefinitely, and our bathing suits come off?"

"Jaden!" you hiss, looking around. "They might hear you!"

She laughs. "Sorry, I'm just feeling good about pulling my weight this mission. I actually got to use my Martial Arts, and I was just as effective as the others. I guess I got a little carried away."

"A little?" But you can't help laughing yourself. Then suddenly you hear a voice in your head.

"Excuse me. Help us? You."

You look around. "Are you playing some kind of trick, Jake?" you ask. "Shouldn't you be concentrating on moving this boat?"

"I heard it too," says Jaden, concerned. "Did someone just ask for your help?"

"Yeah. Do you think they've got an ESPer prisoner on board someplace?"

"I'll go ask Jake to poke around with his ESP."

"Wait. Water. Here. Help. Please?"

"I just heard it again!"

"Me too, something about the water?"

You both look down, and there's a dolphin in the water next to the boat, and it's looking right at you.

"Uh..." you say. "I think that dolphin is Sending to us... like an ESPer."

Chapter 8.3

Escort Mission

*You are Clayton, trying to get this boat back safely,
and now you have been interrupted.*

“Can’t you see I’m trying to figure this boat out?” you ask, exasperated. “I had to hack into the computers as it is, now you want me to stop?”

“There’s a dolphin out there!”

“So play with him some other time, we need to get back.”

“No, no, he asked for our help, and I think he’s an ESPer.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Actually,” says Jake, turning, “if there are human ESPers, other animal ESPers isn’t that much of a stretch. Being an ESPer is just a genetic mutation allowing access to a part of the brain that allows manipulation of the physical world on a mental level. Dolphins are smart enough, right? They could learn to do things just like we can.”

“I thought it was just a background,” says Jaden innocently.

“You know what I mean. The point is, you say this dolphin of yours needs help?”

“No, he said himself that he needed our help. Rose talked to him, there’s something fishy, if you’ll excuse the phrase, going on under the sea.”

“We can’t help him right now, we’ve got a mission to finish,” you say. “Tell him we’ll meet him at the dock tomorrow at sunrise. It’ll keep until then, right?”

“We did finish this mission,” Rose protests. “We’ve caught the bad guys, they’re locked up, it’s over!”

“Is it?” you ask, seriously. “Take a look at your character sheet.”

“Fine, but I don’t see how that’s going to make any difference.” She takes it out and looks it over. “What am I looking at?”

“You don’t yet have the XP from this mission, and your cards haven’t changed, right?”

“My gosh, you’re right! I guess we’re not done, then. You win, I’ll tell him.”

Rose and Jaden leave again, and you manage to get the boat back to the dock without incident. You call the local police to come check it out, and get a ride back to where you're staying.

"How did it go?" asks Dhul, coming to meet you.

"We took out eight people on a boat connected to the murder and attempted murder, we should know shortly if there was anyone else involved."

"What?" asks Dhul sharply.

Jake looks over at you quizzically.

"To make sure there weren't other people as part of their group we didn't see. They'll be questioned with magic and you can continue your campaign in safety."

"Oh, yes, of course, good, I'm glad the NPC-PS can be counted upon to be so thorough. Such a shame about my running mate, of course. I wonder if they'll find someone willing to step up and take his place before the election? Well, that's not your concern. I assume you'll be leaving in the morning?"

"If you don't mind, I'll just check you over one more time to make sure you're not in any danger now?" asks Jake.

"Certainly, certainly, can't be too careful, now can we?" He laughs, holding out an arm. Jake touches him, after nodding to Rose and getting a spell cast on him.

"No, seems you're totally safe," says Jake, relieved. "I guess we will be heading back soon. We met a dolphin and Rose says he needs help, so we're going to be investigating that tomorrow, but our association with you is over, it seems."

"Dolphin? Oh right, fairies can talk to all animals, of course. I hope you can help him. I can't thank you enough for your protection!" Dhul gushes. "You've really saved me, and I appreciate it."

"It was our pleasure, sir."

Passing a magic shop on the way back to the place you're staying, Jaden excuses herself and runs inside.

"Oh, right, she has card 31 this time," you say. "And magical items are the best." You get out your gun and lightly stroke it, smiling as you think about all the bullets you can shoot without reloading. You notice the others watching you and hastily put it away again. "Ahem. We'll just wait for her, hopefully she won't be long, even though she is a girl."

Luckily, she isn't, by that I mean she isn't long, she's still a girl,

Rose would never forgive- anyway, she runs out smiling. “We’re like sisters!” she says, showing Rose a bracelet on her upper arm, seems like she’s Invulnerable now, too. You can’t blame her, she is a close up fighter, after all.

You all head back to your rooms and Jake motions the girls to follow him, so you all pile into one room.

“There’s something really weird about that guy,” Jake says. “I was monitoring his emotions on a hunch while we were talking, and when you said something about others being involved his fear shot through the roof. Then he was relieved and finally really, really happy to see us gone. I think we should have another little chat with him, in a less formal setting. Maybe before we go see your Dolphin friend tomorrow, Rose.”

“Just so you know,” you say, “there’s no way I’m swimming around in the sea with all this hardware attached to me, breathing spell or not.”

The others look at your arms and head. “Yeah, I guess not. Sorry Clayton,” says Jaden.

“I don’t think there will be much use for a hacker down there anyway, and my guns won’t work, that’s for sure. I guess in the morning you can send me back and I’ll just get started writing the report. I can tell them where you guys are, assure them you haven’t run away.”

“Still, maybe you can have a little mini-adventure before then to make up for it.” Jake smiles. “Now here’s what I propose we do...”

Chapter 8.3

Escort Mission

You are the shadowy figure that has just slipped into the room where Dhul is sleeping.

The moonlight softly falling through the window blinds upon the sleeping figures softens his features, making him seem more like a cuddly teddy than a dead man, which is what he is, even if he doesn't know it. Your face is covered, and the pistol in your hand has a reassuring weight, like it can solve all the problems in the world if you just let it be itself. You are at one with the night, your eyes taking in every detail of the room, leaving nothing to chance. Your escape route is planned, the money's in hand, all you have to do is verify the man's identity and the job you were hired to do will be done. The man is on his back, snoring, which you know to be symptom of a more serious condition than most people realize. Something he should have asked his doctor about before this. Well, he won't be snoring, or even breathing in a moment or two, so what's it matter?

You spring onto the bed, covering the man's mouth with your left hand, waking him, and pressing the gun to his temple, letting him know you mean business.

"Dhul Fiqar?" you ask, disguising your voice with a rumble. It would, after all, be very poor form to kill the wrong guy. He squeaks an affirmative, his eyes wide.

"Good," you say. "Then I can complete the job I was hired to do. Mainly, two dead presidential candidates."

Dhul is trying to say something, you decide to let him. "No shouting now, or I pull this trigger." Dhul jerks his head, trying to nod. You let up a little with your hand.

"It was me," he hisses. "I'm the one that hired you to kill us both. But you were all captured, those NPC-PS guys swore it! The ESPer even said I was out of danger!"

"Well, you're not," you say simply. "Hiring assassins to kill yourself? Sounds like a really round about way to commit suicide. I don't buy it." You press the gun a little harder against his head.

"Wait, wait, I can prove it!"

You pause. "Go on."

"I wanted to run unopposed, like always happens around here, but noooo there had to be another person that wanted the job. So I had to get rid of him. But I had to do it smart, don't you see? So I told NPC-PS about threats on my life and hired you guys to kill us both. I knew I would be protected by NPC-PS so I wouldn't actually be killed, but my running mate would be. That would throw all suspicion off me, and the money would never be traced, and I would become president! It was a perfect plan! How did you escape capture?"

"I'm the only one you hired," you answer. "The others worked for me. I sent them after you both expecting them to be caught. They were just pawns. Predictably they slipped up and got captured, and it turned out you weren't actually dead. I had to come finish the job myself. I am, after all, a professional, and that means something to me, even if it doesn't to you."

"You distanced yourself from the deed, just like I did. Amazing! You really are a pro!"

"Flattery will get you nowhere. Now why should I believe this story? You said you had proof?"

"Yes, I memorized the bank number you gave me because I didn't want to write it down. I wired \$10,000,000 to bank account number 87685821380 a week ago, 5 million for each of us. A small price to pay to become president, don't you think? So you see, I don't really want myself killed, so you can go, with my thanks! Keep the money, of course!"

"The price was a man's life, and you're not going to become president in any case. You'll go to jail for conspiracy to commit murder and attempted suicide!"

There's a pause. "What?" Dhul seems confused.

"Hit the lights," you say in your normal voice, pulling off your mask. The lights in the room come on, revealing a fairy, an ESPer and a martial artist, and Dhul stares into the face of Clayton, which of course is who you are. Uniformed officers bust into the room and roughly slap cuffs on Dhul.

"It was all a trick!" he wails, "to get me to confess! You really are pros, just not the kind I expected!"

"That's right," says Clayton, enjoying himself immensely. "It was all recorded, with my cyber eyes and the mic I'm wearing. Now I get to say something I've always wanted to say: Take him away, boys!"

For some reason you can't stop laughing, this is the best you've felt in a long time. You really, really, love your job. You can't imagine what you were worried about before joining NPC-PS and meeting the others. It seems to be working out great.

The group gets another 6 XP, and the next day new cards appear in place of the old. Except for Clayton, who gets none, because he's gone back to base to write up the report. Sorry Clayton! Or... does he?

Chapter 9.1

Under The Sea

You are Jaden, and one of your favorite old movies is The Little Mermaid, why do you think Rose learned a Breathe Water spell, anyway?

Hint: it was not to talk to fish, who are boring.

That morning you can hardly sit still at breakfast, you're so excited to be going underwater and helping some dolphins out. Next to horses they're your favorite animal and they're telepathic? Who knew? A little after sunrise Rose goes off to find the dolphin, and explain he'll need to wait until the stores open. As soon as they do you all head to a dive shop to get some supplies, namely bathing suits, fins, and advice.

"So you're going diving off the coast? There's some nice places for it around here, we get a lot of tourists in this area."

"It was actually rather spontaneous," you explain, "we're from NPC-PS working a case and something else came up, so we need to go down and take a look." You neglect to mention exactly why, the dolphin Rose spoke to, named Blue Flash, requested that you keep the dolphin's powers of ESP a secret. Of course you forgot, but Rose reminded you before you went in, so that was okay.

"So you'll need tanks and things? We do rent them by the hour." The man's eyes are alight, thinking he'll be making some money today. "Of course I'll need to see your diver's licenses, this equipment requires special training."

You shake your head. "Nothing so crude, I'm happy to say. We'll be using magic."

"Oh," he says, disappointed. "Well, there are still some sharks and other dangers in the area, but I suppose being from NPC-PS you can handle yourselves."

"Quite."

You pay for the gear and head back to your rooms to change. You wear your bathing suit under your clothes, and of course Rose ogles you as you do.

"Looking good, sexy!"

"Oh, quiet you!" you say with mock indignation. "I assume you're

going to make yourself bigger, that's why you had us get you fins as well?"

"That's right," she replies. "Hard to use my wings underwater, you know. So it's easier to be big and wear fins. I could just hold onto you, of course, but I think it's better if I can get around on my own if I need to."

"The point is, why didn't you have me buy you a suit too?"

"Because I'm not hung up on nudity like you humans are."

"I'd noticed."

You throw a T-shirt over yourself and go down to where Jake is waiting, and it doesn't escape your notice he sneaks a peak at your legs. You have no interest in looking at his, of course.

You catch a bus down to the shore, and slip into the warm water by the docks.

"How exactly is this going to work?" Jake asks, putting his shirt into his inventory as well, and climbing down the ladder. He's trying hard not to look at Rose, who is wearing nothing now, and sitting on your head.

"I'll be casting at least two spells on you," Rose explains. "Tirelessness, because swimming is pretty hard work, and Breathe Water. If we have to go too deep I'll cast Darksight on everyone as well. If I do, I'll be at a minus four penalty to everything for maintaining the magic, so don't expect much more than that."

"About that, there's no chance of that magic failing while we're down there, right?"

"Not unless I got knocked unconscious, and thanks to my Invulnerability, there's not much chance of that. I'll ask the magic to stay until we return to the surface, so it'll stick around as long as we need."

"Okay, I guess now we're just waiting on your--"

A head pokes up out of the water, it's Blue Flash, and he seems to be laughing at you guys, his head is bobbing up and down, anyway. Rose starts laughing too.

"What's the joke?" you ask her.

"Blue Flash is just interested in that stuff you put around your bodies. He thinks it's very weird. In the water it'll just hold you back. Not you so much Jaden, but Jake's will. He suggests you take it off, he doesn't want you getting snagged on anything down there."

You feel your face heating up.

"Suits me!" says Jake, enthusiastically.

“It would!” you say, splashing him. He laughs.

“Look, I take it you two have no interest in my being naked, and naturally enough it’s the opposite for me, but I am a professional. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Oh, fine,” you say, secretly pleased it’s turned out this way. You didn’t want to bring it up, but you prefer swimming nude anyway. Maybe Blue Flash picked up on that and broached the subject for you? “But not here, we’ll wait until we’re under, there’s other people here you know?”

“Fair enough,” says Jake. “Make with the magic and we can finally figure out what our friend here wants.”

Rose explained to you all yesterday on the boat that Blue Flash said he needed help. He wouldn’t tell us exactly what that need was until we were “at home” with him, which we took to mean underwater. Rose tries casting Tirelessness, but it doesn’t go off. She says she wants to save her energy for later, so she’s not putting any extra effort into it and got a bad roll. Trying to cast it on three people really is harder. She tries Breathe Water next, which she says just makes it, and then Tirelessness, which works that time. She’s only down three energy, and hops off your head, flies into the air and gets bigger, folding her wings down and diving into the water.

“Show off,” you mutter, and dive after her.

Your fins easily propel you through the water, following Blue Flash, and you realize the dive shop owner was right. This is a very pretty area to swim in. You hope you get some time to more fully explore. Jake has his suit off already, so you sigh and put yours into your inventory and out of the way. You have to admit, this does feel wonderful! Jake seems to be a better swimmer than you are, moving easily through the water with lazy strokes of his fins.

A few minutes of swimming, and you can tell you’re going down and away from the shore, and startled fish make way for you, one of which Blue Flash snaps up. You’re sure Blue Flash is going way below his top speed so you all can get used to this environment, and after a while he turns. The water has gotten a little darker, but you can still see him okay.

“He wants to know if you’re all okay,” says Rose, now bobbing gently in the water next to him.

“We can talk?” says Jake, surprised. “Hey, this magic stuff is okay!”

“As if there was any doubt,” Rose says, shimmying in a very naughty way.

“Oh, don’t tease him!” you say, pushing water at her.

“Splashing me underwater? That’s not going to work too well.” She’s smiling.

You see Blue Flash bobbing his head again, he’s a good natured creature you suspect. “He says that answers his question, and will now be happy to tell you why you’re all here.”

“Please!” you say, glancing at Jake, who glances away from you guiltily. Men!

Rose listens for a moment. “He says he must swear you all to secrecy before that, because he’s going to tell you one of the secrets of the Liquid World, that the Above World can never know. Face him directly and swear you won’t tell anyone else what he’s going to tell you.”

He turns to Jake, who swears, and then to you and Rose, and you similarly say you will not tell anyone this secret. He seems satisfied, and starts telling Rose what seems to be an involved story. He communicates with him for quite a while, and finally she excitedly turns back to you.

“You’re not going to believe this,” she says, “but he says it’s true, and we’ll meet them in a few minutes. Basically, the trouble is that some deep sea creatures have been encroaching on mermaid territory lately, and they need our help to figure out why.”

“Mermaids are real?” ask both you and Jake at the same time. You stare at each other in shock, then look back at Blue Flash.

“Assured. Real. You will meet. Very secret. Cave. Come.” You hear Blue Flash’s thoughts in your head, and he turns and swims a little, wanting you to follow.

“Lead on!” you say, amazed. This trip has certainly been an eye opener for you. You’re going to meet actual mermaids? No way!

“Why couldn’t he just tell us that directly with Sending?” you ask Jake, swimming a little closer to him.

“It costs energy,” he explains. “One to establish the connection, one per minute to maintain it.”

“Pushing thoughts into people’s heads takes energy?” you say, confused. “I mean, I can see why Telekinesis would, you’re moving something in the physical world and you’re not using magic. But this is just thoughts.”

“Hey, talk to the Creator. I didn’t make the rules.”

“Weird.”

“Also he doesn’t seem to speak the same way we do, or his rating in Human Language is really bad. How would a dolphin learn Human Language anyway?”

“The mermaids?” you guess.

“I guess, but fairies still speak Fairy. Rose learned Human Language growing up because she hung around humans. Are mermaids human enough to grow up speaking Human Language or would they speak Mermaid?”

“I have no idea. And here’s another little tidbit to ponder; Do dolphins get XP? For that matter, are there PC and NPC dolphins? Could they have adventures of their own? Are there wizard dolphins? I wish I could ask him directly.”

“Keep your eyes open and maybe you’ll find out along the way. I just had another thought. Fairies can communicate with all ‘natural animals,’ right? If this dolphin can talk to us, even with Sending, is he strictly a ‘natural animal’ anymore? Where do you draw the line?”

Blue Flash now swims you down along a different route you were taking before, back towards the seabed. Still going deeper, and you wonder how he keeps the route straight when there are really no landmarks to speak of down here. It’s still getting darker, and you’re about to ask how much further it is, and should Rose cast Darksight? The seabed looms up and Blue Flash starts looking for something.

“He says to stay here a moment, he’s looking for a cave entrance,” says Rose, and Blue Flash takes off. He’s back a moment later and you follow him to a narrow looking passage.

“He says we’ll have to wait again. He’s going to go in and tell them we’re coming so they don’t panic. They’ve apparently got some magical fear thing going on around non-mermaids, so just be aware of that.”

Blue Flash shoots into the passageway, and Rose looks in after him.

“You guys want Darksight now?” she asks. “He said it was a pretty straight line, you can’t get lost, and there’s light inside. We could just try and make it through.”

“Save your energy,” you say. “We’ll chance it.”

A little while later you hear a voice in your head saying it’s okay to come through, and you all grope your way through the tunnel. Up ahead, it does get lighter, and the passageway bends upward, which you follow and come up in a cave with air!

You pop your head out of the water and look around the cave, which seems to be full of air, interestingly. Several balls of light hang spaced around the ceiling of the cave, illuminating the damp walls and the figures huddled at the other end. All of them are long haired and beautiful, young looking but very nervous. Their hair ranges from pink to green and blue and gold, and there are six of them, looking very helpless. From where you are, you see a channel has been cut, making a sort of trough which runs the length of the very small cave they've found to hide in.

"Oh wow," you can't help saying.

"Oh WOW!" echoes Rose, coming up beside you.

"Oh my," says Jake, coming up last, his eyes wide.

"Eeeek!" say the mermaids in union, trying to get further way.

"It's okay, I'm here to help!" Jake pleads. This causes the mermaids to flinch away and shut their eyes, obviously terrified.

"Nice job, hero," Rose says to him. "Maybe you better keep your mouth shut for a little while?"

Jake nods, and the mermaids look your way again.

Rose climbs out of the water, stooping under the low ceiling now that she's human sized. "You don't have to be afraid," she says, shaking her wings off and holding them up. "See, I'm a fairy. I just happen to be a bit bigger than normal for the moment. Your friend Blue Flash found me and said you needed help, so we're here. He won't hurt you, honest!"

"We're sorry," says one.

"It's the curse," says the next.

"It's nothing personal," says another.

"We just have to be afraid of people now," says another.

"And try to get away no matter what," says the next to last.

"Men especially," finishes the last.

You were afraid of this- they are So Darn Cute, you just want to hug them until they pop! Wait, curse?

"What curse?" you ask them.

"The curse that turns us into mermaids."

"We aren't born like this."

"We become like this."

"It's been like that as long as we remember."

"It was an evil wizard who cursed us."

"We hope he's long dead now, the jerk."

You see Rose swooning a bit, their cuteness is almost too much to

stand. You're feeling it too. *Have to counteract it*, you think, *but how?*

"Do you always talk like that?" you ask.

"Not normally."

"We're just scared."

"Too scared to say much."

"So we're taking turns."

"We're really sorry."

"It's just been so awful!" The six threaten to burst into tears. You hold your hands out, offering a warm embrace. "It's okay, it's just with your LOOKs, and that hair, and your cute voices one at a time like that, it makes me want to—" you can't finish the sentence with "ravish you" now can you?

The mermaids push the one with blue hair forward, and she protests but they hold her there and she sighs. In fact it looks like they're all trying to hide behind her now.

"As the sorceress for the group, I guess it falls to me to explain. I'll try." She looks down into the water, then takes a deep breath, which you feel Jake following with his eyes. "What you're feeling is part of the curse too, though it usually only works on men. Anyway, I guess a little history is in order, then we can tell you what we need. It's only fair, as you have agreed to help us. At least I hope you will, after you hear our problem."

Both Rose and Jake are nodding their heads yes, vigorously. You have a sneaking suspicion Jake has played card 19 on the lot of them, and of course Rose with her Easily Infatuated didn't stand a chance. You've often wondered if she'll one day leave you because of it, but she has always come back to you thus far. If you're being honest with yourself, it's a real concern for you.

"Long ago in history an evil man sought the hand of my great, great grandmother. She rebuked him, and he created a curse that would be passed down through her line. Basically, that she would have a child and then be drawn to the water, unable to resist. Once there she would change into a mermaid and gain eternal youth and beauty. In this way forever unable to return to the world above. The curse then passes to her daughter, we only have daughters, and is repeated. And so here we are. We get Darksight, immunity to any affect caused by water, anyone who sees us gets fascinated, and our LOOKs go way up, of course. But we forever have tails and just thinking about going to the surface or talking to a person makes us very scared."

“That’s some curse,” Rose says, impressed despite herself.

“We think he somehow tied it into people’s beliefs about mermaids, but there’s no way to tell. It’s not too bad a life, when we get used to it.”

“Wait, you’re all mothers and daughters, then?” you ask.

They all nod, sadly.

“Some of us have been killed over the years, especially now with the serpents riled up, so it isn’t an unbroken line. I’m the oldest, actually.”

“So couldn’t you break the curse by not having any children?”

They shake their heads sadly. “We’re compelled to it. If we wait too long, we just grab the first man we see, and the magic makes him... perform. It always results in pregnancy and it’s always a girl. Then within days we’re called into the water and it starts all over. I suppose if, between those times, we killed the child, it might break the curse. But what mother could do that?”

There’s a long pause.

“Oh, so, wait,” says Rose. “I thought you wanted help to break the curse, but you say your problem is serpents?”

“We doubt the curse could be broken now. I suppose if you found the girl yet to become a mermaid and tried to help her? But for us, we just want to live our lives as best we can. Our problem is the serpents that live deep in the water, they’ve started coming up and making trouble for us. We don’t know why, we can’t talk to them. Several of us have been killed already, and now we’re all too scared to leave this cave we found.”

“They’re too much for your magic then?” Rose asks.

“I don’t know any combat type spells, just utility magic, like the light spell and making the air for this cavern. I was born with the Spark of Magic, so I studied hard before the curse took hold of me, trying to figure out a way to break it. I also learned spells like this,” she points around the cave, “because I knew I probably couldn’t, and it might be nice to breathe air and have light once in a while. Anyway, there are dozens of them, more than any one person could handle even with magic!”

“Depends on the spell,” Rose said, thinking. “Still, your dolphin friend chose well. I’m happy to go talk to them, see what they want. As long as you can show me where they are.”

“You mustn’t!”

“You’ll get chomped for sure!”

“Why would they listen to you?”

“We don’t want you to die!”

“Just forget us, maybe this is all part of the curse too.”

There they go again, you think.

“Don’t worry so much,” Rose assures them. “See this?” She points to her bracelet, and then to mine. “It makes us both Invulnerable. They couldn’t chomp us if they tried. And I can get bigger than this if I have to, bigger than they are even, and make them listen. We’ll be fine!”

All this time she’s been slowly moving towards them, and by now she’s kneeled down in front of them. They’re all facing her now, in a line by the side of the trench, hope in their eyes at last.

“You... mean it?”

“You would risk it for us?”

“Who you just met?”

“Even though you know it’s just the curse making you want to?”

“And we can’t ever do anything to repay you?”

“Without question!” says Rose, confidently.

“Oh, thank you!” they all shout, grabbing her and hauling her under the water, where she’s hugged on all sides. A curtain of bubbles rises around them as the air in their lungs is expelled and they start breathing water again. Rose is squealing and hugging them back just as hard as they are hugging her. Must. Control. Jealousy. They finally come back up again, dripping and smiling, Rose most of all.

“Hey, I’m going to help too!” Jake says. They all give a little shriek and flatten themselves against the far wall again, this time holding Rose in front of them.

“I think they forgot I was here,” says Jake, a little hurt. You’re not sure if you should be sympathetic or annoyed. Laughter wins out, bubbling out of you as you shove his head underwater, then follow him down.

“Come on hero,” you say, grabbing his hand and hauling him down the tunnel. “You have to do the quest before you can get the girl. Or girls. Or mer-girls, in this case. If only you weren’t so scary...” You both laugh, as Rose and Blue Flash follow you out of the cave. Blue Flash tells you he will lead you to the site the mermaids made their home, which has now been invaded by serpents of the deep.

Chapter 9.2

Under the Sea

You are Jake, and it's totally your luck that, having met a bunch of beautiful mermaids, they are scared to death of even the thought of talking to you.

As you swim, Rose gets the story of the serpents from Blue Flash, then relays it to you.

“I guess they had a pretty nice spot,” she explains. “Relatively flat. Good warm current through the area. Lots of little tunnels and caves nearby to play hide and seek in, not too dark. Deep, so people don’t come swimming by, but not so deep as to be hard to swim in. Quite a nice place, for an undersea area. However, a couple of weeks ago these really big serpents showed up and started chasing them, and they’ve been there ever since. Until they found that cave they had basically been on the run. Because of that, some of them had been killed by sharks and other natural hazards of the sea.”

The nerve of these creatures, you think, disrupting the happy play-time of these poor, cursed girls. With their shimmery hair floating lazily in the water like a puffy cloud around them. Laughing and chasing each other, without a care in the world. Dolphins as friends, having races, finding treasure on the sea floor, and those bodies! So soft and-

“You’re thinking about the mermaids still, aren’t you?” asks Jaden, shaking you out of your day dream.

“N- No,” you stammer.

“Good, because we’re here.”

You look, and the others have crouched down behind a small rise. Beyond you see about a dozen snakelike creatures dozing or slowly swimming around in what must be the Mermaid’s Paradise, as you now are calling it. You have to admit, the creatures are impressive. Each is at least as long as a school bus, with glittery scales and large heads. They move like snakes through the water, their long bodies slithering as though on land. One of them looks over at you, and everyone ducks down, wondering if you’ve been spotted. Blue Flash has left you, and you don’t blame him. Before he hid, he said that if you do a Sending to him, he’ll come and get you again.

“I, uh, I guess I should go see if I can ask them to leave, or whatever?” says Rose, uncertainly.

“We’ll back you up?” you ask, more question than statement. You think of those poor, cursed girls back in that cave, and the card you played when you first saw them. Now you must do whatever it takes to help them, Invulnerability or no. In fact, you have card 31 now, maybe you should get one of those bracelets too? If you live?

She shakes her head no. “There’s no way we could take even one of those creatures,” she says. “We just don’t have the power. There must be a reason they’ve come here though. If they really are deep sea creatures they didn’t come to this spot on a whim. Something drove them up here, and we need to figure out what. I’m hoping they’ll at least come see what I am before eating me. They shouldn’t have seen something like me before, maybe that will keep them occupied while I make my pitch.”

“Better have your wand out, just in case,” I suggest. “Just don’t forget it’s you keeping us alive down here, so don’t drop those spells!”

“I know.”

“I’ll try to keep Telekinesis on you, so I can yank you back if you need me to,” you say, doing so. “But my range is only 16 meters, so try not to go too far.”

“Okay.” She takes a breath herself, then pokes her head up again, and gives a little squeak. “I think they saw us. So much for Hiding checks, did we even roll them?”

You all carefully look over the ridge, and yes, all heads are turned this way. They now all look alert. Great.

Rose swims up and out towards the serpents, which are now looking quizzically in your direction. Obviously they are not used to tasty morsels just presenting themselves to become a quick snack. They seem interested, and several coil themselves into what could almost be a sitting position.

Rose starts doing whatever it is she does to talk to animals, and they all look at each other, seemingly almost stunned. One swims forward a little bit and they seem to have a dialog. This might seem positive but just makes me think she’s telling him how bad she tastes and please not to eat her. Finally she starts swimming back to us, and the one she was talking to hangs there looking at us. I help pull her along. I spent the energy for the Telekinesis, I might as well use it.

“Oh, you were so brave,” says Jaden, grabbing Rose and hugging her tight after she swims back over.

“It’s okay, they’re not hostile or anything. Actually, they seem pretty decent, for ancient monsters of the deep sea.”

“You’ve gotten a truce?” you ask.

“There was never a war,” she answers. “The mergons, that’s merdragons, only wanted to talk, and share the area with the mermaids if possible. I guess the mermaids just fled on principle. They’ve been waiting for them to come back, so they can ask formally. If the mermaids said no they would just keep looking.”

“They’re dragons?” Jaden asks, looking sharply over at them. The one Rose was talking to curls into a U shape and waves the tip of his tail at us, and Jaden hesitantly waves back, a weird smile on her face.

“Of a sort,” says Rose. “Water dragons, adapted to deep places, they’re the ones that need our help, not the mermaids. It seems something is happening to their water, forcing them to leave their den and come up here. If we can find out what and fix it, they’ll return to the deep and the mermaids can have this place back.”

“Then let’s go!” you say.

“Ah,” says Rose. “It’s not that simple.”

“You said we could help, right?”

“Oh, they’d love our help. They’ll take us to their den right now if we can look the problem over. Our problem is they’re going pretty deep. They said probably too deep for creatures like us to survive. I have a theory that our Invulnerability will protect us, but we only have two bracelets.”

“I have card 31!” you say, excitedly. “I can go buy one and get back here, no problem!”

“Ah,” says Jaden. “It’s not that simple.”

“What is it?”

“The ingredients to make this particular bracelet are quite hard to come by,” she explains. “So the price of this particular item is quite out of proportion to other magic items of this same spell grade. At least this is what the shop owner told me. He had to call a few other shops to find one, and then got it there magically. It’s a deal most magic shops have, where the store gets a cut if another store has the item a customer wants. For obvious reasons, this particular item is very highly sought after, and thus, rare. He said it would probably be some time before another was made, anywhere. Honestly, you don’t want to know what it costs, normally. It’s only the card that let us buy it. We got two right in a row, after all.”

You are a little too distracted to wonder if a PC with a card can just generate money like that, what are the long term effects on the global economy generated by that action? So you keep it simple: “You’re saying I won’t be able to buy one now, probably?”

“Right.”

“Okay, I’ll just summon Blue Flash back and I’ll hang around the entrance to the mermaid cave. See if I can be un-scary enough to tell them what’s going on, and wait for you guys.”

“Actually, I had something else in mind,” says Jaden, slipping her bracelet off and handing it to you. “Here.”

“What?”

“I’m just loaning it to you, understand? Your abilities as an ESPer are going to be more useful than mine as a martial artist where you’re headed. It’s better that you go, not me. I would probably just make their situation worse anyway, I just know it. I’ll go back and tell the Mermaids what’s going on. I can manage that much, I guess.”

You don’t realize she’s played card 16 to try and get a little mermaid action of her own while you’re gone. If you did, you wouldn’t blame her. She does offer you her other cards if you need them, but really only 27 will probably be relevant. You accept them with thanks, and call Blue Flash back with a Sending. Rose explains, and tells Jaden to hang on to one of his fins. They go zooming off, Jaden shouting “Weeeeeeeee” as she is carried away by the dolphin.

You slip the bracelet on and push it up your arm. With a 5 STrength your bulging bicep holds it in place easily. (You’re fooling yourself, you’re no stronger than NPC. The bracelet was sized for a girl, and your twiggy arms are nothing special.) You’re ready to go.

Except you’re not. Rose casts Darksight on you both, spending five energy and taking the additional two segments of casting time to make sure she gets it. *Now* you’re ready to go, and she’s at a -4 to everything. You hope she doesn’t need to do much more magic. The lead mergon says you should grab hold of him, and there is a bony plate sticking up from his head. You and Rose wrap your arms around a horn that grows from the center, Rose in front and you behind her. She gives you a funny look, but you explain the water pressure from how fast these things go might hurt her wings, which look pretty delicate. She reminds you that you’re both Invulnerable now, remember? There isn’t a physical force on earth that can harm either of you. You are embarrassed and start to move

away, but she says to stay, it might be cold down there so she'll be happy for the warmth. She calls something to the mergon and they all take off, diving into the deep.

The light quickly fades, and your Darksight takes over, making the mergons highlight in black and white. You can still see them perfectly. You continue diving, and the pressure makes you feel funny, but it doesn't hurt, and every so often the mergon slows to ask if you're okay. Rose always says yes, so it doesn't take too long to get where you're going. You are glad of Rose's warmth, and hold her close with one arm once you're sure you won't get swept off. You also hit her with *Combust* a few times, warming her, and thus yourself. She won't take damage from it, but it still warms her up. Suddenly the sea floor looms up, and you wrinkle your nose. There's a weird smell here, which shouldn't even be possible. The mergon you're riding slows, and Rose tells you he says it just ahead. The force of the water above you is pressing you down, making you feel heavy and strange. It still seems tolerable, thanks to magic.

"Do you smell something?" you ask Rose, looking around.

"Yes, and I don't like it. Is it some kind of poison seeping into the water from somewhere?"

"Uh, does Invulnerability protect us from poisons?"

"A poison is damage, right? Just inside your body rather than outside. You might want to see a healer for an anti-poison spell before you take that bracelet off though, just to be safe."

You nod. "Okay, now what?"

"I'll ask if he can take us to where the smell is worst," she answers, doing so. The mergon's head bobs, and pulls away from the others, who Rose says wish us good luck.

She says he has to swim slower here, there are dangers in the water, even this deep. There are even predators enough to make mergons pause. We need to be cautious.

"My Precognition should warn us of any danger," you explain. "And I'll start making ESP checks as he swims, see if I can't sense anything."

"Good idea."

"There's an object ahead that's had a lot of fear seep into it," you say, getting an 11 on your check. You realize that isn't much, but you can feel the fear coming off whatever it is, so it must have been recent or very

strong. The smell is getting worse.

“Hey, our friend here isn’t Invulnerable,” you say to Rose. “Should we be concerned?”

“I suppose we could get out and swim, or maybe walk given the pressure we’re under, but he’s huge, it would take a lot to poison him. I can buy an Imbued antidote and he can just eat it when we’re done.”

“Okay, but tell him if he feels sick to just leave us, we’ll make it somehow.”

“You’re sweet. Thanks for thinking about him, most people probably wouldn’t.”

“It’s okay, he’s our ticket out of here, you know. Would you be able to swim out from under this kind of pressure?”

“No,” she answers, “but I could make a portal to take us out.”

“Where would you put the other end? Seawater would shoot out of it like a cannon! Anything underneath would be pulverized.”

“Oh, hadn’t thought of that. I could put it high up, and you could just fall. That wouldn’t hurt you any more than being crushed by water here is. It would also disperse the water enough to not pose a danger.”

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t come to needing to prove that theory.”

Then you see it, there’s a huge ship down here that’s rusting away to nothing. This must be the source of the problem- unless you miss your guess, the thing you’re smelling is fuel. The tanks from this ship must have finally burst open and started leaking, and that’s causing the problem for these mergons. The question is, what are you going to do about it? The ship is many, many, many times bigger than the mergon you’re riding, and moving it would just make the problem worse.

This is going to be tricky, you think.

Rose tells the mergon to swim the length of the ship, and you see it’s named MV Danny F II. You estimate it’s about 40 body lengths of the mergon you’re riding, way too big for any power you know of to move. Something has to be done, and soon. If this mergon is 15 feet long, that makes this ship 600 feet long! Wow. Circling the ship, you see holes in the hull, and wonder how dangerous it would be to go inside.

Rose interrupts your thoughts. “He’s asking if this is it. He’s gone past it a million times and never looked at it twice. He thought it was just a funny piece of rock. He doesn’t have much experience with sunken

ships, I guess. It's been here awhile, he says it was here when he was young, so that's a few years ago."

"So it just started leaking recently?"

"Maybe. There's probably not much current down here, it would take some time for fuel to leak out and pervade the area."

"I guess. Look at that, animals in pens," you say, looking in through a large hole. The cold water preserved them well, and of course the things that live down here wouldn't be interested in ancient sheep or cows. "This ship must have been carrying animals, no wonder the fear is so strong here, all those animals were afraid for their lives as it sank. There must have been thousands, if this ship was full. Maybe tens of thousands." You shake your head. "What kind of storm or disaster could sink a ship like this?"

"Maybe it was hostile magic?"

"What wizard would sink a ship full of animals?"

"A vegan one?" You look at her, unsure if she's joking or not. "Well, no, on the other hand, they don't eat meat, so I suppose they wouldn't want to kill the animals either. I don't know."

You guess she wasn't joking after all.

"I'll ask the mergon to get above it, we'll need to come up with a plan and it's better for him if he doesn't stay too long."

You agree, but wonder, as large as it is, if just the two of you can actually come up with a plan to move or neutralize this boat.

You are now floating above the massive ship, taking stock of what you have and what you can do. There's your bathing suit, a flash light, and other useless odds and ends in your inventory. Rose, being a fairy, has nothing but her wand. *Odd how something can fit into a person's inventory only if they could conceivably carry it*, you think. In any case, no help there. You have been putting points into both Cryokinesis, creating ice, and Combust, creating fire, so conceivably you could ignite the fuel. Under this much pressure you wonder how that would work. You have the *Bilocation* skill, so you could at least go take a look at the inside of the ship without endangering yourself. You guess you should start there. After all, if it's *all* leaked out there's not much you'll be able to do, right?

"I'm going to go in with Bilocation," you say to Rose. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Try not to go anywhere, I have to find my body again visually when I do this, okay?"

Rose nods, and you close your eyes, willing yourself out of your body. You get a 13, meaning you can safely be out of your body for that number of minutes. You hope not to need that long, you're getting cold down here. You speed towards the wreck and your consciousness easily passes through the hull and into the ruined ship. It's only then you realize it's a good thing the Darksight magic follows your... whatever you are at the moment. It would have been pitch black down here otherwise. That would have been a problem.

You head towards the back, where you figure the fuel tanks are, and it takes you only a moment at your speed to check the entire ship, top to bottom. All along the bottom of the craft are various compartments, and sticking your head through you can tell that a lot of them are full of oil, it being darker and thicker than the water in the passageways. You find several that are leaking, all through the ship, and realize the sheer volume of fuel it must take to move a ship this massive. You shake your imaginary head at the sheer size of this task and think maybe it's hopeless after all. Time to head back.

The mergon is still slowly circling, so he doesn't fall too much in the pressure he's under, and you reenter your body, blinking.

"How bad is it?" Rose asks.

You tell her about the leakage, and the number of storage tanks that exist inside the craft. You ask if she has any ideas.

"The thing we have to avoid is making this situation worse," she says, looking down at the craft. "I could probably make some kind of explosive with Creation, but done wrong that could just blow more fuel out, rather than incinerating the whole deal. If we had a team of wizards down here we could patch up the holes, magically create air and just float it up. Sadly, 'A dolphin who's an ESPer asked for our help for some mermaids who were chased out of their home by some water dragons' is exactly the opposite of what we can tell people. We can't have people poking around down here, and give away the secret of the mermaids. You saw how they reacted to you, think how bad it would be with hundreds of people looking for them!"

"I know. The only idea I had was somehow using your Teleportal to syphon the darn thing dry, after blocking the outer hull off so no more water gets in. But the problem there is, where do we put the other end of the portal? That ship is huge, and we might never be sure we found all the holes."

"I've been thinking about that, I could go learn the Shrink spell,

but that would only help so much. I think I might be able, if I had a ten in Venus, to reduce the size modifier of the ship by five. As near as I can figure that would maybe take it down to the size of an elephant? We could get some mergon to help move it someplace else in that state, if there was an area devoid of life. It might be too fragile to move at this point. I was also thinking about Antidote, if it would even work on fuel, which strictly speaking isn't a poison. I'd have to cast it about a million times if you say there's that much. Oh, it's only going to get worse, too, isn't it?" She turns to hug you, and you can tell from her voice she's crying now. "I have to tell them there's nothing we can do. Nothing at all."

"Come on now," you say, hugging her back. "Don't talk like that. You must have contacts in the fairy world you could ask, right? They wouldn't betray the secret of the mermaids, would they? There might be a spell you're not aware of that could help."

"Even if I did, which I don't because I hang around with Jaden all the time, not fairies, they would most likely be NPCs, so their magic wouldn't help at all. That's the reason there are PCs like us, isn't it? Because we can be better than them, and do greater things!"

"But you're still only one person," you say gently. "Magic might not have limits, but the world does, and you do. Now come on, let's head back. We're both freezing, and upset, and that ship isn't going anywhere. We can take a few weeks and research some magic stuff, or look up what other things have been done for shipwrecks in the past. We're not abandoning them, we just need to find the right solution."

She sniffled, quite a feat this far underwater, and looks up at you. "Okay, I'll tell him to take us back. Thanks, Jake, I do feel a little better, you're a nice guy."

We held on again, and I used some more energy warming us up, not having anything better at the moment to do with it. We climbed, so to speak, out of the dark and back to the area where the mergons were living now. Rose explained things to them, how we would look into things and come up with the best solution. I proposed that, if the mermaids agreed, they could all share this area. I was sure the mermaids would like the greater protection the mergon offered. Just so long as they didn't get any funny ideas about seeing what mermaid tasted like.

They agreed they wouldn't eat a sentient creature like a human, even a half human, and my ESP said they were being sincere. I did express amazement they knew a word like "sentient" but she said regular land dragons were sentient, weren't they? So were these dragons! They

even had their own language, just like dolphins, so she was sure they were telling the truth.

Wait, dolphins have their own language?

We got carried back to the mermaid cave and Rose helped to clear up their misunderstanding. While the mermaids were justifiably cautious, they did come out of their hiding spot and make their way back to their home territory. They thanked all of us (from a distance) for helping them out, and we promised to help them further if we could. Once we figured out how to without betraying their existence. They swam off.

“But the ship is way far away from their territory,” protested Jaden, now back with us. “They would never be spotted from that far away.”

“We would need a reason why NPC-PS should spend millions of dollars in a recovery effort,” you explain. “They would say, let the ship leak, there can’t be anything down there anyway. Right? But if people knew there were mergons down there, this place would be swarming with people wanting to study them. All it would take was one mermaid sighting and their lives are over.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Can I have my bracelet back now?”

“Not until I get Antidote cast on me. Shoot, what were you saying about that Rose, that it might not even work?”

“Oh, it’ll work on you,” Rose assures you. “Any fuel you breathed in is a poison inside your body, so the magic will work on it. Just sitting there on the seabed, that’s a different question, magic wise.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

We swam into the light, hungry and mentally exhausted, even as the magic kept us from being physically so. The warmth felt great after the cold we had experienced, and we climbed out of the water onto the dock. Rose shrank again. Jaden picked up her fins and put both sets in her inventory for the duration, and we stared down the dock, discussing where to go eat.

“Anything but seafood,” groaned Jaden.

Behind us, Rose started cracking up. We turned around. “What?”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” she said, pointing at us.

“Oh yeah!” said Jaden, her suit appearing out of her inventory again. “I totally forgot!”

“Guess we had other things on our minds,” you sheepishly agree, putting your suit on as well.

“Or maybe,” said Rose, smiling at us, “it wasn’t really as important as you made it out to be, after all.”

Chapter 10.1

Solitary Adventure

*You are Clayton, having just stepped through a wobbly portal that morning, ready to *ugh* write the report for what happened in Syria.*

You knock on Sergeant Draughon's door and hear "come in" from inside, and step through. He's there typing away at his computer, because one third of the military is waiting around, one quarter is terrifying violence, and the rest is paperwork.

"Ah, Clayton, yes, come in. Just getting back?"

"Yes sir," you answer. "I'll be writing my report and submitting it shortly but I just wanted to let you know my other team members have stayed behind briefly to take care of some personal business. Of course if there's another mission right away I'll call them immediately."

He waves it off. "They can raise skills anywhere, let them have their fun. If it's fun they're having?"

"No sir, something about some marine life problem our fairy found out about. It's underwater, anyway, which makes me more than a little nervous." You lift a metal arm and point to your metal skull.

"Yes, I appreciate that. So much the better, getting some extra XP in on a side quest, nothing wrong with that. Nice work, by the way, those thugs you brought in have been processed." He shakes his head. "Imagine hiring hit-men to kill you, and then us to protect you, all for a plot to become president. Devious."

"Yes sir."

"Thank you for coming to inform me, you're dismissed."

"Thank you sir."

You smartly turn and walk out of the room, wondering what to do now. You didn't think about that, they'll be getting some extra XP most likely, while you'll cool your heels back here. Lucky jerks. Oh well. No XP to be gained here, and you don't even have enough to raise your pistol skill again, so there's no point in going to the range. It's early anyway. Guess you might as well hook into your personal terminal in your room, and write that report. Being a cyborg is sometimes quite convenient, you can just plug in and think the words into a word processor. Forget all this typing nonsense lesser people have to struggle with. You can even attach

video clips of key moments, your eyes being cameras, after all.

Guess that's why the group picked you to do the reports. You suppose Jake could have done it, but you wouldn't trust Jaden to do it, and Rose? You chuckle. It would take her an hour to write a paragraph. Still, you don't mind it, and head down to your room to get it done so you can at least have the afternoon off. You pull your badge out of your inventory and touch it to the panel next to the door. Glancing to make sure no one is watching, with your other hand you punch in your door code. What was it again? Oh yeah: Full4utt0Mags4L1f3. Of course most people use the badge and a handprint, or badge and eye scan, but that's not really possible for you, so you need to use a ridiculous password to open your door. You're all on the same team here, so why that's even necessary is beyond you, but orders are orders. Of course, getting inside the building requires much more stringent measures, plus physical guards. This "lesser" secured area requires only two things, rather than the three for the gate or four at really secure points. The lock opens and you twist the knob to open the door, giving it a shove to move it.

Usually this sort of minutia is pointless, but from outside your body the Observer is noticing it because at that instant, a spell goes off. Both you (as Clayton) and the spell roll initiative, to see if you can do something before the spell fully takes effect. Luckily for you, enough of your body is still human that you can spend energy on REFlexes to boost your initiative, which you do, getting a 20. The spell rolls a 15, its maximum, so you have just enough time to send your ID badge whirling gracefully through the air and down the hall with a toss, before you-

What?

Oh, you're wondering how this magic is going to work on you? With you being all beefy and cyborged up as you are? You thought you were basically immune to magical effects, did you? We can just pause the action for a moment, don't worry, you'll be fine, just stand there and I'll explain it to you.

The spell you are about to be engulfed in is Teleportation Sphere and I quote: "If possible, unwilling targets may dodge out of the area, but otherwise receive no resistance." The area is ten meters around you, much more than the 1/4 speed dodge you might otherwise attempt, so your dodge would be useless.

"But wait," you cry, cracking open a "conveniently located rule-

book of your own: “A cyborg imposes a penalty to all ESP and MAG skill rolls.” See it says ALL right there!

Ah, but in this case, the wizard who created this cunning little trap rolled a 20 by taking extra time and using an enhancer. Whoever it is doesn't mess around and knows full well you're a cyborg, so there. So even if it were the case you got a resistance against this particular spell, it wouldn't help you in any case.

“Oh,” you say, defeated. “I guess that's it then.”

Obviously, none of that actually happened, so we'll just pick up where we left off, shall we? Ahem- down the hall with a toss, before you are whisked away to parts unknown, and find yourself standing in darkness.

You are Clayton. You are not forgetful. You have no problem killing scumbags that deserve it, unlike cute little fairies who are detached from the way the real world works. You remember your arms being ruined by gangers, after they held you down and made you watch what they did to your mother. You remember finding yourself in the hospital, near death, ready to give up. You remember your father, all the more terrible in his fury because it was contained, ready to lance out like a laser beam to burn those responsible. You remember the surgeries that replaced your arms with these mechanical ones. Afterwards, learning how to do everything again with them, giving up valuable XP for the privilage. You remember every moment, and you have trained long and hard to never be helpless again. You remember Belquis, the little girl frozen in ice, and the story she told you about finding herself in a dark room, where ice crept up upon her and took away her thinking. You remember, and you do what any PC would do in your situation- First, spend a split second checking for cards. Yup, a very nice assortment, thank you very much Narrator. Next you Quick Draw your guns to start tearing this place apart with the majestic song of your soul- violence.

Sadly, even in your controlled rage, you must obey the laws of the world. What you don't know is that a wizard is in this darkened space with you. They have been for some time, awaiting someone to come. You both roll initiative, and unluckily, the wizard wins. To your advantage, your opponent does not know that it's you. The wizard begins casting the ice spell that will lock you away, taking the full time just in case. Perhaps this person is a little overconfident in the preparations they

have made? In any case, the spell will go off on delay 7, and a magical circle surrounds you.

It is now your action, so you Quick Draw your weapons. You get a seventeen and that cuts your delay by 6, enough to get them in your hands instantly and still start shooting 'em up, pow-pow, in this action. You do so.

"I declare," you begin, "card 7." A card with Glasses Guy appears, in the "nice guy" pose, and you declare a called shot to your opponent's body, a two round burst. You want to hurt them, but not enough to kill, because you want some answers. In this timeless space you think you see the figure's lush, red lips twist into a slight smile. Of course that's impossible because they are invisible. Just like an invisible pink unicorn cannot be pink, because it is invisible, the lips of the wizard in the room are similarly colorless.

The card overrides local reality for an action and right now you, Clayton, can do anything you could conceivably do. And it's in the realm of possibility a lucky shot will hit, and thus, hitting this person with bullets is guaranteed. But of course you're not done yet: "I declare card 10," and now you imagine a look of horror take the place of the sneer as you have played your cards right and are about to bypass the Invulnerability your Invisible opponent has no doubt worked so hard to cultivate.

You orient on the Invisible figure thanks to card 7, and two bullets bark out of your right gun, striking the figure in the chest.

The two bullets do 6 and 8 damage, respectively, causing enough damage to incapacitate the wizard instantly. This of course makes them lose the spell they were casting, the same ice magic that trapped poor Belquis. This causes the figure to be encased in ice instead, and you can't help thinking how odd that is. Given it wasn't completely cast yet, how could the magical energies know what the opposite of the intent was? However the thought has barely crossed your mind when the figure is lit by another circle of magic, and vanishes.

"Yeah, you better run!" you shout, wondering how the wizard triggered any magic encased in ice like that. I guess you don't know about *Spell Trigger*, do you? No you don't. In fact there's a lot about magic you don't know. One thing you do know is you have to get out of this dark room, and somehow let NPC-PS know you're in trouble.

And in addition to magic, there's one other thing you don't know. A timer has begun counting down in a computer back at the NPC-PS base. When it reaches a certain number of seconds, will trigger a level 5

alarm that a door has been left open. This flags it for investigation by a surveillance agent installed in the complex's computers. Some seconds after that, the alarm will be upgraded to level 3 and a human agent will be dispatched. That agent, ultimately finding your Ident card dejectedly abandoned, will follow procedure. This procedure involves calling in a possible level 2 alert, and beginning a search for you.

You don't know this, because you are a PC and such procedures are beneath you. I mean, right?

You do know you're not getting a GPS signal, so you're not sure where you are. You have no special eye modifications so you can't see in the dark. You wish now that you had spent some of that extra \$4,000 a month you have coming on some more cybernetics. Oh well. You try your cell phone, but it's jammed or something, you've got no signal. You play it around the room and the glow shows a door in one wall, so you move off to one side and try the handle. Locked. You can see it's just a regular wooden door, so you stand out of the way of it and put a couple of shots through it into the space beyond.

You have, you estimate, at least a hundred bullets in your "bullet crate" back at the base, and mentally count down to 93. *It would be quite embarrassing to run out*, you think. Oh sure, going through all 100 bullets in this situation might take some doing, but by the Narrator if that's what it requires, that's what you'll do, darn it!

Rather than waste bullets shooting wood that won't care one way or the other, you punch the door down, letting your armored hands do the talking. You then bust through it, rolling to the side and expecting to be shot at. You raise your hands to chest height and casually dispense a couple of bullets down the hallway by means of your guns. This is in case more Invisible fiends lie in wait, not for the sheer joy you feel shooting with abandon. (You count down to 90). No other shots ring out, in fact looking around, the place seems deserted, making you wonder where they are and to get on with it already.

Looking around, you see some diffuse, grey light coming in through a busted out window, the right side of which is boarded up. Graffiti covers the walls and cobwebs and dust greet you as an old friend. Looking back it seems you were in some sort of closet, and have now busted into the main hallway for wherever it is you currently are. This is a more open area, leading to narrower hallways to your right and left with a series of doors on either side. Most of the doors have been broken down and you cautiously make your way down the hallway to the left and peer inside

one. It seems to be an abandoned apartment complex of some kind, given the layout of the room you're peering into. You check several others, carefully inching your way down the hall, and it's the same basic layout for all the rooms you look into. Empty, dirty, and stinky. Apart from the disturbed dust leading to the closet you were in, this other hallway doesn't seem to have been used recently. You wonder if it's better to make your way out this way, but decide against it. Your tracks are clearly visible on the floor, where going the other way they would be more confused. The wizard you shot has clearly gone that way, and scuffed things up. You carefully walk backwards to try and minimize your footprints on your return journey, just in case. After walking up to a broken window, of course, making it seem like you got out that way, in case someone comes up after you.

Why you don't just go out that window is obvious, for one the rusty old fire escape which is half missing would never hold your weight. Secondly, if there are others here, you want to question them, and that means finding them. You head back the other way, staying low and keeping your guns ready. Heading over to the window you see there's a light drizzle going on here, and you're on the third floor of some kind of brick building. This appears to be the back, there's a one lane access road between the building and the strange branchless tree that's sitting there.

Could be a telephone pole, you think, I've heard of them. Whatever it is, it's certainly a relic of an earlier time that was never torn down. You see no vehicles. Below you there's a similar three paned window, at least it would be if it wasn't boarded up on either side with a glass missing from the middle. You don't see anything to shoot at, so you move back into the building and down the right hallway, following the footprints to... an old bathroom. Super. Most of this room is smashed up, but one sink and toilet are intact. Probably made so with magic, you guess even evil wizards need to use the restroom. You shrug as you look at the paint splattered symbol on the door. It was a woman's bathroom, long ago in history. *Just the nearest one, you think, it probably doesn't mean anything.*

You are wrong.

With no tracks to further lead you, the story of this place becomes plain to you now: evil wizard Teleports in, goes between room and bathroom. Waits for cunningly placed trap to go off, whisking unsuspecting person (you) into an icy doom. Either evil wizard looked into window to find the place, or used a fly spell to not disturb the dust. Then they could

Teleport in whenever they wanted. *But how would Ice Clayton be carted out of here*, you ask yourself. The little girl was put into a compartment, but you're a little big for that sort of thing. Could there be a vehicle somewhere with some clues in it?

You notice a staircase going up, and see a door on the ceiling you could use to get to the roof, which you carefully take advantage of. Pushing it open a crack you feel the cool rain coming in, and wiggle your way out to stay as low as possible. You grab a loose brick and prop it open, not wanting to leave yourself totally exposed from that quarter, but not wanting it to close behind you, either. You recheck your GPS, which is not working any better now than before, which you find to be rather odd, considering. Still no cell signal either, which begins to worry you a little.

Now on the roof you see the structure has three sections, a small area with a peaked roof in front, this larger central area, and a smaller area which looks built out the back, possibly an addition. You head toward the back, and sure enough, there's a large truck there that looks like it might be refrigerated. It's probably rented, but if you can get the license number you could probably tell who rented it. At least a description, maybe. Your super zoom eyes are useless at this angle, you'll have to go down there in person, which is just fine with you.

You make your way back down to the third floor and find a staircase down to the second, moving as quietly as possible. As quietly as a dude with a bunch of cybernetics and no Sneak skill can. Then you remember your Overconfidence weakness and forget about Sneaking altogether. You can take anything they throw at you! Still, there's Overconfidence and there's stupidity, so you glance around every corner in case there's someone else here.

There is.

You catch a glimpse of movement as you pass by an apartment door before you go flying, head first, into the wall. Luckily your head is armored, so you smash through the drywall easily and twist around, firing.

You get a pathetic 6 on your LUCk check to hit him, while he gets an 8, and scampers back away from the door. You wrench your head out of the wall. *My opponent must be an ESPer*, you think, *I didn't see any magic circle, I just went flying*. You see the door has a crack in it, probably how he saw you. Putting one of your guns away you smash it down with a metal fist, rolling Initiative as you step into the room.

You go first, scanning the room for the individual. Oddly he's just standing there, and seems shocked when you turn your head and look at him, rolling a 9 on your perception check to notice him through his Masking attempt. You take a deferred delay to aim at his body, and say "Don't move."

"Put that gun down and come with me, there's no reason for violence," he says, making your brain tingle a little with Compulsion. It's super... ineffective.

"Sure," you say, dropping the gun and making him smile. You take a few steps towards him, making him think he's in control. When you're close enough, you punch him in the head, holding back by -3 to make sure you don't kill him by accident. Naturally he tries to dodge, and you get a 12, which misses him as he rolls a 15.

"Crap!" he shouts, and concentrates. You roll opposed Close/ES-Per Combat checks, he gets a 9 and you get a 14, so you know you're going to act on the same segment. You hold, wondering what he's going to do, and now that he sees you clearly he realizes how much cybernetics you have. Changing tactics, he launches part of the door at your leg, hoping to trip you up. Sadly, he gets a 9, meaning he can lift 100g. For comparison, that's about the weight of a carrot and a half. Not really a standard unit of measure, carrots, but you get the idea. Not wishing to settle for that pathetic result, the Narrator spends card 25 on his behalf. The universe still wishes he be disappointed, rolling a 7, which is even worse. The piece of door stays where it is. As you see nothing happen, you assume he tried something which failed because of your implants, and go ahead with trying to clock him in the kisser again.

Aarg, you think, as he dodges with a 19. He's using energy, must be! You use an off hand action to pistol whip him, thanking the Narrator for giving you Ambidexterity so you're not at a further penalty. You don't hold back this time, your Bad Tempered is starting to show, this guy is annoying you!

Again, he rolls higher than you, not being able to spend energy on your arms is really hampering you right now. You can clearly see he's on the defensive, and won't act again until after you do, so you swing again. You just barely miss him, and declare card 2, getting a plus 2 bonus, but the Narrator uses his card 24 to re-roll the dodge, getting even higher this time.

"Not very good at this, are you?" asks the thug, moving away from you and enraging you a little more. You can see he's breathing heavily,

so he can't have much energy left, you hope.

He doesn't need much for his next maneuver, which is to use Electrokinesis to stun you. This hits your left arm with a bolt of conjured lightning, and you go sprawling to the ground in shock. You're basically helpless, but you have one more ace up your sleeve.

"I declare," you announce mentally, "card 42." As your head clears you realize the man has run away, probably that was the last of his energy. You're sure the card made *something* good happen for you, so you stagger to your feet. You retrieve your gun and check yourself over, you'll have to have some work done on your arm, but not that much, thank the Narrator. The rest of you is a bit sore, but you're alive, which is what counts. You doubt there's any more goons around, but you keep your gun out just in case.

Making your way down to the first floor, you sincerely hope there's just some kind of Inscribed spell on this place that's messing up your GPS and cell phone. Once away from it you can call NPC-PS, tell them where you are, and get picked up again. It's more likely something technological though, as your GPS is integrated into your head, meaning your bonus to resist magical stuff should work on it. You cock your head curiously as you look out the hole where the window glass would be in the front door. Are there flashing lights out there? You stick your head out, and six uniformed officers grab guns and point them in your general direction.

"Come out with your hands up!" one shouts. "Drop all weapons!"

It seems the Narrator wishes to make your life more interesting, and has played his final card, number 29, as a Disaster Strikes. He wants to make sure you get as much XP on this mission as you can. Wasn't that nice of him? I mean, you were complaining about it before, right?

"I'm Clayton Garlington, NPC-PS," you shout out to them. "I'll throw you my badge, or you can call NPC-PS yourself."

Naturally, acting under the influence of the card, they do not believe you.

"We have the place surrounded," the officer continues. "Come out with your hands up or we will open fire!"

You might as well do it, you think, they'll see who you are soon enough. You put your gun into your inventory, doubting any of these jokers are PCs. Only a PC can see through to another PC's inventory, so it'll be safe there.

"I'm coming out!" you shout.

You get thrown on the ground and handcuffed, then roughly pushed up against the wall and frisked. Naturally they don't find anything.

"I'm NPC-PS," you repeat. "I can show you my badge if you'd like."

"Where's your uniform then?" asks the officer close to you.

"I just came back from a mission and got Teleported here," you try to explain.

"I'm sure you won't mind coming down to the station with us then and sorting this all out," says the man. "There was a report of gunfire in this area, so we have to follow procedure."

"Fine," you say, defeated. "Let's just get it over with."

They stuff you in the back of a police car and disappear inside the building, probably looking for other people to needlessly inconvenience. Finally they come out and start driving, which is when your fellow NPC-PS members cast a certain Venus spell, Telesummon, to get you back. As you are now outside the sphere of protection put on the building you go from cruising at 35 miles an hour comfortably strapped into a car... back to base. Instantly you find yourself being flung through the air at 35 miles an hour without benefit of said car. Needless to say, you crash into someone quite violently and keep going, smashing into a wall as well, where you are utterly knocked out.

It just wasn't your day, was it?

You do get 7 XP for being alone through that adventure, plus the 3 for the Disaster Strikes, which is something, right? Right?

Chapter 11.1

Nature of Magic

*You are Rose, having just eaten lunch and rested up.
You are feeling full, mentally more alert but you are still annoyed.*

“So, should we go back to base?” asks Jaden, having eaten a nice lunch and walked around the town a little bit, seeing the sights. You are all once again in uniform, fewer hassles about things that way. Rank hath its privilege and all that. You’ve visited a healer, and had the Antidote spell cast on you and Jake, so Jaden once again has her bracelet back.

“I’m not so sure,” says Jake, looking at his character sheet. “We haven’t gotten any XP and our cards are still here.”

“There must be something we can do then, if we can just think of it!” you say, excited. “I wonder if there’s a library around here I could research some magic in?”

The group asks around and is directed to a nearby library that has a selection of magical texts, and you hop a bus to get there. Walking in, you see it looks like a pretty normal library, and you flit around looking for the magical books. You don’t see any, but there is an older looking fairy gentleman with a long white beard sitting on a shelf you fly over to. Fairies don’t age very fast, so this bugger must be *old* you think to yourself.

“Excuse me,” you say to him. “I’m looking for the magic section, do you know where it is?”

The fairy looks you over, stroking his beard. “Well, well, nice to see someone so young taking an active interest in magic. Of course unless I miss my guess, young one, you’re in NPC-PS so this might relate to a case?”

“Sort of,” you answer. “There’s something I had to do for... some wildlife... but I’m just not sure how to accomplish it.”

“Well, come up and sit by an old fairy and tell me all about it. Broken Branch, at your service.”

“I’m Rose Petal, nice to meet you.”

“So what’s the trouble that only magic can solve, eh?”

You wonder how much is safe to tell him. He is a fairy, so you guess most of the truth is fine. “There’s a sunken ship near here that’s

polluting the water, and I want to move it. The problem is, it's huge! I could go learn the Shrink spell, but my rating isn't high enough to shrink it enough to really change the situation. Plus it's so old it might just break apart if my ESPer friend puts stress on any one part of it. It needs to get tiny, not just less huge."

"Do you have a low RESolve then?" asks Broken Branch.

"Above average, actually. But what does that have to do with it?" you ask. "Energy isn't going to help in this case. I don't need a bonus to casting, I need a higher rating, and I need it now! Sadly I can't use Augment Skill to make myself better at casting magic."

"My dear, is it possible you don't quite know how your own magic works?"

"What do you mean?"

"I do take it that you're a Natural Magician?"

You nod.

"Then you already have everything you need. From what you said, you think putting energy into a spell increases your result at the end?"

Again you nod.

"That is actually not the case. You are, quite literally for that instant of time, artificially increasing your rating for that planet."

That takes a moment to sink in. "You're serious?"

"Always," he says, his eyes twinkling. No really, it's a magic thing, you'd have to be there.

You get out your character sheet. *So if I'm holding Darksight and Breathe Water that's a minus three. I spend my maximum energy, seven, and raise my rating by six, you think. That would give me a total rating in Venus of twelve. "If I recall correctly, the Shrink spell shrinks things by a size modifier up to half the rating, correct?"*

This time he nods, but then you shake your head.

"So it's still going to be twice as big as a person." You reconsider. "That is a lot more manageable though. Maybe?"

"If I may make another suggestion?"

"I'm all ears," you say, using a metaphor, just in case it wasn't clear. No magic that time, you did not spontaneously become an ear.

"I couldn't help but see you have 10 XP right now, so you could probably learn more than one spell at a time, yes?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Do you know Pluto?"

"I do! I learned the Phase spell because I was tired of trying to

open doors, so instead I can just Phase through them.”

He chuckled. “That is a hazard of being our size, isn’t it?” He slowly got up. “Come, I think we can teach you what you need so you can take care of your pesky ship.”

“You mean it? Oh that would be so great! Let me tell my friends, I’ll be right back!”

You zip over to where Jaden and Jake are looking at things, and tell them you found a fairy who says he can help.

“Put your hand through him,” cautions Jake.

“Whatever for?” you ask, then realize why. “Oh, you’re right! I’ll be careful.”

You hear Jaden asking Jake why she would want to do that, and realize she’s forgotten about the attempt by the invisible person to abduct you a month or so ago. Typical, but then, you’re just as much bound by your Weaknesses, so you can’t blame her. Coming back you grab the old fairy’s hand and cheerfully ask which way.

He’s real.

He flies you over to the information desk, and tells the lady there he’s vouching for you, and to please open the magic section. She nods and gets up, leading you to the back of the library where she punches in a code on a door and holds it open for you.

“Thank you,” you both say, and fly inside. There’s a rather small selection here, not as big as you imagined for the trouble to get into this place. Several magically aware people are sitting around studying things.

“This is just where the more dangerous texts are kept,” says Broken Branch, as if reading your mind. “The more general magical books are upstairs.”

Oh. You didn’t realize this place had a second floor. One of the men looks over at Broken Branch and smiles.

“Found yourself a girlfriend, did you?” he jokes.

“A pretty young thing like this with an interest in a dried up old fossil like me? I wish!” They share a laugh, and you’re flattered by the attention, even if they are the wrong gender. “This is my friend, Terrance, here looking into some boring thing or another he thinks is important,” he says by way of introduction. “This is Rose Petal, she has a spot of trouble with a sunken ship she wants moved, so I’m here to see what I can do for her.”

“What do you need me to get down?” asks Terrance.

“The Pluto volume, there,” he says, pointing. Terrance gets it down and opens the cover, and you both thank him. He rifles through it, coming to a stop and saying to you, “This here’s the one!”

You bend over to take a look, and read through the formula. You get exactly the difficulty on your *Magical Scripture* check, and realize this is a spell that will allow you to physically store energy, so you can spend more than your normal maximum at once! Your eyes get wide as you realize the implications of this spell.

“Now you see why it’s locked up in here,” says Broken Branch. “It seems an innocent enough spell, but for you Natural Magicians, it is extremely potent.”

You shake your head, awed. This is exactly what you need.

“You should be able to learn it in a couple of minutes,” he continues. “I’ll go find the Shrink spell, it’s probably in here as well.”

“Thanks!”

You study the spell for several minutes, and you’re sure you’ve learned it, as 5 XP goes away from your character sheet and the spell appears in your spell list on the notes page. You can’t wait to try it out!

Meanwhile, Broken Branch comes back with Terrance, and sets another book out in front of you, saying it’s the Shrink spell. You make another check, getting a twelve this time, and again you are easily able to understand the spell. There’s a snag though, it’s a grade 6 spell, but you only have 5XP left! Looking at your sheet, you decide to cannibalize singing from a 2 to a 1, getting enough to learn the spell. Good thing you studied how to cast Venus spells so you could learn Autonomous Assistant a couple of years ago to help Jaden clean her room. You’re all set!

“Thank you so much,” you say as Terrance puts the two volumes back. “I, and a lot of other people and creatures are in your debt.”

Broken Branch smiles at you. “Sure thing, little lady. Hope it goes well for you!”

“I’m sure it will, now.”

You race out of the library and find your friends, saying it’s time to go back down and take care of that ship! Jake uses Sending to one of the mermaids, probably scaring her, but telling her you guys are coming back down and to please meet in the cave again. You cast Teleportal and go to the cave immediately, then get set up to cast the magic. You all strip again, but it’s totally dark now, the sorceress mermaid having

left so there's no light anymore. You cast Darksight and Breathe Water on everyone, but skip Tirelessness. You're not changing form and the mergon is going to do all the swimming, you hope.

"You'll, uh, have to stay behind again," you say to Jaden.

"I know, I just want to see the mermaids again."

"Me too!" says Jake. You look sharply at him. "I mean, in their natural environment, you know?"

You all plunge down into the water after Jaden hands over her bracelet, and you swim out of the cave. You're holding on to Jaden's hair, and are pulled along nicely. There's a mergon and a mermaid waiting for you outside the cave. The mermaid of course swims off as soon as she sees you all. Rose talks to the mergon, and says we should all get on, so we do. He swims Jaden over to where the others are, and it looks like everything's okay here, the mermaids are swimming and having fun again. The mergon look interested in their antics, so you're glad that worked out. Jaden wishes you good luck, and you once again descend towards the ship, this time being held in Jake's arm. You mentally go over the steps of the spell, and soon enough you're in range. The ship is right where it was, cold and impersonal, but this time, you know what you have to do.

First you need to cast Energetic Accumulation on yourself, so you put 5 energy total into it, and cast it successfully. Ugh, you are now at a -5 for your next spell casting, but you still have 28 energy so it should be enough. You gather energy for an action, then another, leaving you with 14, and begin to cast the spell of Shrink on the boat. You can't fail to cast the spell, and get a 26 on your check. The boat instantly shrinks by a full ten size modifiers, making it just a little bit bigger than you are.

You are now maintaining so much magic you would be at a minus seven to doing anything else, and drop Energetic Accumulation. You don't need it at the moment. Meanwhile, water rushes in with a boom to fill the now empty space, and the mergon swims against the pull, trying to right himself. It only takes a moment for everything to be still again, and you all hunt around for what is now a tiny, toy sized boat. It's easy to spot in the large boat shaped depression that's been left, and you motion to Jake it's now up to him. He nods, and reaches a hand out, floating it into his hand with Telekinesis. You figure he can wrap force around it at all points, keeping it together, and whatever he does seems to work. It stays whole as it floats over to him, and he closes his hands around it. It's a bit of a struggle, holding the ship at that size, but you ask the mergon

to please take you near the docks. You're going to give these people their ship back, so they can clean it up like they should have done in the first place.

He takes you most of the way there, and you tell him that's far enough. Jake will take you the rest of the way, so he doesn't get spotted. The mergon says thank you for giving them their habitat back, and for introducing the mermaids. They are becoming friends with them and will help defend their territory if needed from now on. You're glad it worked out, and tell him so.

Jake swims you over to shore, and you tell him to jam the ship in the sand and then get back. He does, and when you judge it's far enough away you let the shrink spell go. A 600 foot ship appears, creating a shockwave that turns you both end over end in the water, laughing. The ship pokes out of the water almost straight up, and water pours out of the various holes in the hull.

"That should get their attention," you say to Jake. "Let's get back to Jaden and get out of here!"

You start casting, and open a Teleportal to the mermaid camp, and they all shyly wave and thank you from behind a mergon.

"I helped! Don't I even get a hug?" says Jake, being dragged away by Jaden.

That evening, news reporters are baffled by the sunken ship, at least a hundred years old, which has suddenly appeared in the bay. Crews are rushing to siphon off the fuel and remove thousands of animal carcasses from the area. They also start tearing the ship apart so it can be recycled.

"Forgot about the animals," you say, a little sadly. "Still, they should be taken care of." Then you can't stop giggling. "Appeared in the bay *as if by magic*," you shout to the person on the screen. "Don't forget that part!"

The others just shake their heads.

It's back to base tomorrow, your 6 new XP is ready and your cards are gone. Of course Jake used his card 31 on the way back to the hotel to buy a ring with Regeneration on it. This was as close as he could come to Invulnerability, being much easier to make. You all have no idea what Clayton has been through, and that he was almost captured at the hands of your invisible foe.

What poor, ignorant fools you are.

Chapter 11.2

Nature of Magic

Aftermath

A figure, hardly more than a distortion in the air, sits with a glass of something in their hand, watching the news of the day. The figure has had another setback, these PCs are proving most difficult to capture, even alone. This Clayton fellow... he proved to be almost fatal to you. Honestly, it's only your taking every magical precaution that you're alive right now, and able to continue your experiments. *He's made it personal*, the figure thinks, *very personal*. It might be better to just kill him, rather than use him for the experiment. It would be a waste, someone that good might be the key, even though the figure suspects most of his success against you was cards. Still, there are three more in the group, right? And PCs aren't that hard to come by that each must be husbanded. Yes, it's about time you planned something... big.

Chapter 12.1

Ghost of a chance

You are Jaden, hoping Clayton will wake up soon, because even you are getting bored

“I hope he wakes up soon,” Rose says to you, “I’m getting bored.” The hospital room you’re in is on the base, and it looks like every other hospital room in existence. Not that there are many, with ESPers and Magic being rather common in the world. It’s more used to recover after cyborg surgery than anything else. Of course people like Clayton who have a lot of cybernetics and so can’t be magically healed need a place to recover, so it’s an adequate size. Some stupid daytime show is playing on TV, and the windows are open, letting a cool breeze into the room and causing the curtains to flutter a little.

“You don’t have to stay,” you reply. “But they did say he should wake up at any time, and it might be nice for him to see us right away.”

“Yeah, I know. Can’t you do something?” she asks Jake.

“I’m at the same penalty as you for doing ESPer stuff to him, so I doubt anything I can do would help. Besides, he’s not injured, he was just knocked out and then put under to repair that damage to his arm. He’ll wake up on his own soon enough.”

Rose shakes her head. “What were they thinking, using the Tele-summon spell without making sure he was stationary first?”

“Probably just trying desperately to get him back, they couldn’t have known,” you reply.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Get who back?” asks Clayton quietly from his hospital bed, opening one eye and blearily looking around.

“Clayton, you’re awake!” says Rose, flitting over to him. “We’re all glad you’re okay!”

“What happened? Am I in a hospital?”

She nods. “I’m afraid so. Clayton, there’s- I don’t know how to tell you this- there’s some bad news.”

Both Clayton’s eyes open wide. “What? What happened?”

“Your left arm was damaged by electricity somehow, do you remember that?”

“Yeah, I was fighting some ESPer, it wasn’t that bad though,” he pretests.

“It was worse than you thought, they had to replace the whole arm.”

“So? That happens all the time, it’s cybernetic, that’s the whole point. I may be attached to it, but I’m not attached to it, if you get my gist. Anyway, the company will pay for the replacement now, I got injured on duty.”

“You don’t understand. They were all out of left arms, so they had to improvise with a spare right arm they had, so you now have two right hands.”

“What?!” shouts Clayton, bringing his arms out from under the covers and staring at them intently. “Wait, they look fine.”

Rose busts out laughing, “I did it, I got through the whole thing, oh that was priceless!”

“She’s just teasing you,” you say, smiling a little yourself, “nothing like that happened.”

“Oh, I’ll get you for that one,” says Clayton, sinking down again. “How long have I been out?”

“Only a day. They kept you asleep to repair your arm and let you recover overnight. How do you feel?”

“Like I have to do something private. Be right back.”

Clayton goes into the bathroom and returns a few moments later, settling into the bed again.

“But seriously,” he continues, pretending such a thing had never occurred, “I feel fine. It could have been a lot worse.”

“What could have?” asks Jake. “What exactly happened to you?”

“Well,” he begins, “I got back to base and checked in, then went to write my report. When I opened my door I felt a wrenching and found myself someplace else.”

“That was a spell trigger put on your door,” says Rose. “We found them on all our rooms. When we got back you had already been retrieved, so we heard you had gone missing suddenly, and investigated. It was our coming back separately that saved us, if we had all gone back to our rooms at once...”

“I see,” Clayton says, grimly. “I used two cards to shoot at someone invisible in the room I was in, trying to injure but not kill them so we could get some answers. They were casting something which backfired, and then suddenly they were gone.”

“That sounds familiar,” you say.

“It’s what happened to that little girl we rescued,” Rose says to you.

“Who?”

“I’ll remind you later. Continue.”

“I fought off a couple of goons, and finally an ESPer who got me with electricity. Then the police showed up because of all the shooting I was doing, and then I woke up here.”

“A couple of wizards here got together to try and get you back. They had to cast cooperatively to try and get past your cybernetics, and for a while they were just blocked totally. Then suddenly it worked, but I guess you were in a car at the time. They feel really bad about it, naturally.”

Clayton nods. “That area was weird, it was shielded in more ways than I thought, I guess.”

“How do you mean?”

“I couldn’t get a GPS or a cell signal, not even from the roof. I figured there must be some heavy jamming equipment there. I don’t mean a drum set, keyboard, bass and lead guitar, either.”

“Whoever this person is, they do an awful lot of planning to capture PCs, and they must have a lot of power or contacts. This facility got breached, after all! I don’t like it,” says Jake.

“You and me both. Now we have to check our doors all the time before we open them! Can we ever see this spell trigger thing?”

“Yes,” answers Rose. “It appears as a small symbol so if you see anything like that, come get me or another wizard to disarm it. You can just scratch it out, but if there’s a second, more hidden one, which reacts to the first one being scratched out...” she trails off.

“I get it,” he says looking serious. “So, uh, how did your little side-quest go?”

“Great! We took care of the boat, which wasn’t easy, I had to learn some new magic. It should come in handy for other things though, so that’s fine. Luckily just about every problem has a magical solution, if you know the right spell!”

“So find out who’s messing with us so we can take them down!”

Everyone looks around. “The problem there is, our opponent seems to be a wizard too, and a good one,” says Rose.

“We’re supposed to have a meeting about it when you’re up. We’ll go get the doctor so you can be released, and we’ll head over to see

Sergeant Draughon and get briefed.”

“After breakfast,” complains Clayton. “I’m starving.”

“Good to see you up and about,” says Draughon as he walks into the meeting room and shakes Clayton’s hand. “Guess you had some trouble.”

“You could say that, Sir.”

“I’ll be expecting your report soon. You owe me two now, actually. Three total, I want to hear about this boat incident that made the news, as I take it that was your doing Rose.” She blushes. “Now, let’s talk about this mystery assailant that’s been making your lives interesting.” He sits down and hands out a folder. “There have been a disturbing number of cases lately where PCs have disappeared. By lately I mean the last hundred years or so, which is as far as we went back. Of course PCs lead more dangerous lives on average. It isn’t that odd they will either hide away because they don’t want any more adventures, or their adventures are over and they “retire.” Or they just get killed somehow. I had some people comb over the records though and there are some similarities over the years, and that’s what we’ve now picked up on. From what we can tell, someone or some group has been in the business of physically abducting PCs, who are never heard from again. It’s a similar operation each time. They get taken by surprise, are whisked away, and that’s that. You four seem to be the only ones who have tangled with this person, messed them up, and come back to tell about it.”

“Our reason for being chosen as PCs,” Rose says excitedly, “could this be it?”

“It’s possible. A group is usually created to deal with something big, and this seems pretty big. As of now your mission is to track down this invisible foe and bring them in. Other missions are suspended, and you can have all the time you need to spend XP and make things.”

“Wait,” you protest. “If we don’t have any missions but this one, how will we earn more XP? We haven’t gotten that much, we aren’t ready to take on a boss like character yet!”

“I think you’re underestimating yourself,” says Draughon, “but in my experience, you’ll get a lead, investigate it, which will lead you closer and count as an adventure for XP purposes. It’s just that NPC-PS isn’t giving you missions until this matter is closed. You’ll still get them, it’s a natural hazard of being a PC.”

“Oh,” you say, understanding.

“Look this stuff over, and of course I’ll want regular reports. As of now you’re on your own clock. We would like to see this matter resolved before any other PCs go missing though. Good luck.”

You all look the information over, except for Rose, who softly hums while looking out a window. There isn’t much there you couldn’t already guess. Just a bunch of files on PCs that have gone missing under similar circumstances over the years, and a big *unsolved* at the bottom. Great.

“We need to check that house for clues right away, right now it’s our only lead,” says Clayton. “Rose, you need to have seen someplace to open a gateway to it, right?”

“If by gateway you mean Teleportal, that’s right,” she shouts over her shoulder.

“And I don’t even know where it was.”

“Bet we could find out though,” says Jake, snapping his fingers. “No doubt there was a police report filed about a shooting in some empty house someplace and a subsequent disappearing cyborg. Track down that report and we’ve got ourselves a winner!”

Jake and Clayton go to track down that lead, leaving you to decide what to do with yourself in the meantime. Rose suggests some things, but you want to start working on this case a little closer to home, so to speak. You go and see the person in charge of magical objects.

“Why yes, we do have something that will let you see into the past,” says the person behind the speaker grill. You’ve heard there are no doors into the section where the actual magical items are stored, it’s been completely walled off. It was shown to a single person before construction was completed, and that person brought in their replacement. No one else has seen it and can teleport in. Naturally there are all kinds of anti-scraying magics around the place, plus some technological measures thrown in to make the non-wizards happy. “Would you like to take it out?”

“I would, please,” you answer.

Some papers pop out of a slot in the wall you didn’t realize was there, and the voice says “Sign these, please.”

You do, then push them back into the slot, which disappears. A few minutes go by and an object appears at your feet, startling you. Rose nods appreciably. “Good security.”

“I suppose it would have to be,” you agree. “If I can stop by and ask for some random magical object that’s just popped into my head. I didn’t expect I could just sign a form and they would actually give me what I wanted. Who knows what else they might have tucked away back there? Could be some pretty dangerous stuff.” The object appears to be a picture frame, and you carefully pick it up and wonder what you should do with it.

“Point it that way,” says Rose. You do, and she touches it and says “Show me four minutes ago.” You both peer through it, and watch in amazement as it shows both of you coming into this room and talking to the speaker on the wall!

“I guess it works,” you say. “This is one powerful tool.”

You head down to your room where you position yourself in front of your door, and hold the frame up to it. You know where the symbol was that would have Teleported you away from here, and perhaps you can get some answers. You tell the frame to rewind time from the present at maximum speed, and figure you can go forward again more slowly once it happens.

“Once what happens?” asks Rose.

“We’re looking for when the symbol appeared, that way we can check the hall for that time and see if we can get any clues. The person that did it is probably going to be invisible, but it’s worth checking into.”

“One problem, how do we know what time that was?”

“Oh.” You ponder. “Okay, I’ll just hold it there and open the door and look at the clock in the room. We’ll know how many days back it is by the lights changing.”

“Good plan.”

So you do that, and notice when the spell was cast. Sadly, just as you thought, the person is invisible. Rose is still upbeat, she says it’s more than you knew before, and now that you know the exact time, maybe the base records can be checked for anything else odd that went on then. You return the item to the armory and Clayton comes looking for you.

“We found out where the house is,” he says.

“Great, can we get transport there?”

“We’re leaving as soon as you’re ready.”

“Let’s go!”

Your enthusiasm is short lived. After Teleporting between branches of the NPC-PS (which are all connected magically, of course) to one nearer the site, you request more conventional means of travel there. That done you all follow Clayton's GPS to the site. You pass an alarming number of fire trucks going the other way, and start to get worried. You reach the address the police report specified and it comes as no surprise to you whatsoever- The house has been totally consumed in flame.

"Whoever it was didn't waste any time," you say disgustedly, kicking some wreckage.

"Actually they did," says Jake, looking around.

"What are you talking about?"

"This house just finished burning to the ground. Why not burn it a day ago, or just after Clayton fled? No, it's almost as if the fire was set just as Clayton woke up because someone knew we would soon come here to look it over. Like a message, I wasn't worried about it until just now, that sort of thing."

"Diabolical," says Clayton.

"Could they be watching us somehow?"

"I don't see how," says Jake. "The NPC-PS building is pretty well proof against any spell or technology. At least so I thought."

"That was before someone snuck in and put traps on our doors."

"I suppose the place could have been bugged somehow at the same time. We'll have to look everything over carefully."

"So are we just heading back?"

"No, it's a long shot, but let's look around this neighborhood a little," answers Clayton. "I doubt anyone saw anything, but you never know."

"Around here?" you ask, looking around. Dilapidated buildings surround you, this doesn't look like a nice neighborhood. "You're just going to have two poor, defenseless girls wander around here?"

Clayton laughs. "Defenseless girls? Where? The martial arts master and the wizard?"

"Oh, I guess you're right."

You and Rose stick together and wander about aimlessly, unsure what you're even supposed to be looking for. You check in with the others every few minutes but they don't have much luck either. Rose conjures you both some food and water, and you sit on a step and munch fruit. Shady character types pass by, but Rose assures you she doesn't sense

anyone with any hostile intent in the area. Besides, you are in uniform. Who in their right mind would mess with an NPC-PS agent? Sadly your uniform also works against you, no one wants to answer your questions either. Getting caught up in someone else's adventures is not on any NPCs list of things to do. You get nowhere asking if anyone saw anything relating to the fire. You decide to move on, but Rose is complaining she's bored and just wants to go do something fun. That's when you both see the house.

It's on a street with a lot of abandoned houses, all of which have smashed windows and peeling paint, but this one is different. The yard is overgrown, the driveway totally uncared for, but the house itself seems intact. All the windows and doors are in place. To either side are houses that have been totally trashed, this one seems untouched. Why? You call Jake and Clayton, and give them the address. You tell them you found something odd and they should come have a look. While you're waiting you walk around the house and check the windows. No one has been living here for some time, you're sure of that. A police vehicle stops and a woman in uniform gets out, your poking around has not gone unnoticed.

She does, however, notice your uniform, and you show her your badge. Suddenly she's much more cooperative than she might otherwise have been.

"You don't want to go in there," she says, shuddering.

"Why not?"

"Rumor says it haunted. I'm not one much for superstition, I mean a thing exists or it doesn't. Like fairies here, or a dragon. They're real, I can go talk to a dragon if I was feeling suicidal. Or if I was really curious about what the inside of their stomach looked like. A ghost though, I haven't seen much evidence for that. But people do stay away from this house, take that as you will. If you want to go poking around inside, I can't stop you. I suppose you outrank me, or something? Be careful, the floors could be rotted."

You thank her for the advice and she drives away.

"Let's not go in there," says Rose, fluttering backwards away from the house. "I'm not anxious to meet a ghost."

"Don't you have Curiosity?"

"Oh, uh..." Rose gets out her character sheet.

"Oh, shoot, I do!" she puts it away again. "*ahem* WE MUST SEE IF THE STORIES ARE TRUE!"

“That’s what I thought. Look, here come the others.”

You brief them on what to expect and Rose casts Phase on you, allowing you to slip inside and open the door. The air is dusty and stale, smelling of mildew and rat poop, a potent combination.

“Cheerful,” says Jake, covering his nose with his shirt. “I’m so glad to be here.”

“Do we split up?” Clayton asks.

“Will a ghost even show up during the day?” asks Jake.

“Just look around,” you say, exasperated. “It might be some kind of Illusion to keep people out of here, courtesy of our invisible friend.”

They both shrug and head off through the living room, and you hear Jake shout “I’ll check upstairs.”

You and Rose make your way through as well, coming to a set of stairs leading down. These lead into a dark and presumably damp basement. Just the sort of place a ghost might hang out, right?

“Any enemies down there?” you ask her. She shakes her head. You get a flashlight from your inventory and click it on, carefully making your way down the stairs.

“There, look, look!” says Rose, pointing, her eyes wide. Over in the corner huddles a woman, which you can barely make out. She is wearing outdated clothes, and has a really old fashioned hair style. The most important aspect of her person is that you can see right through her. However, as soon as you look at her you feel the need to make a RESolve check, which you do, getting an eighteen. You fight off the effects of fear this woman seems to be generating in you. Rose seems not to be as fortunate, and as the figure raises her head she darts behind you, hiding.

“Hello?” the figure says, hesitantly.

“It’s a ghost,” Rose says hysterically, “We’ve got to get out of here, come on Jaden, please!?”

“What’s she going to do, talk us to death? If it is a ghost it can’t touch us, right?”

“I don’t know what powers a ghost has, I’ve never seen one! They’re real, we have to leave.”

Meanwhile the woman is looking sadly at you. “Go on, run away,” she says, sounding resigned to her fate. “They all do.”

“See, let’s get out of here!”

“I probably won’t be able to do anything for it but I want to talk to it. I’m not afraid. Go on, if you want.”

Rose seems to struggle against her fear of this ghost and her loyalty

to you. "I'll... I'll stay, just don't get too close."

"Why don't you go get Jake and Clayton, bring them down here."

"Good idea!" Rose takes off up the stairs.

"What's your name," you ask, turning back to the figure, "are you really a ghost?"

"Tosha Nolder," says the figure. "You really aren't afraid of me?"

"I think I would have been, if I failed my RESolve check. What are you doing down here?"

"It's been so long since I actually talked to someone," she says, a little hope appearing in her eyes. Then she looks down again. "You may as well just leave, you can't help me."

"Probably not, but I'd like to at least hear your story. I might know someone that can help, I'm a member of NPC-PS, so I have some contacts."

Or not, as I don't actually have that background. Huh.

"You mean it? You aren't just playing a trick on me?"

"I mean it."

"Well, okay. I'm cursed, I guess. A long time ago, I don't even know how long it's been, it seems like forever, I caught the eye of a powerful wizard. But he was haughty and cruel and I turned down his advances. In retaliation he did this to me. I've been stuck like this ever since."

"He turned you into a ghost?"

"It seems that way."

"That's some powerful magic. What is with spurned wizards cursing people, anyway? We just met a bunch of mermaids that had the same story!" *Wait, did they ask you not to tell anyone about that? You forgot.*

Tosha nodded. "I've long despaired of anyone finding a way to fix me, and my life is long gone now. Now I just sit down here, alone. Most people run away from me like I'm the most terrifying thing they've ever seen, or they try to kill me which of course doesn't work. They've tried magic, bullets, explosions. It all got rather dull after a while, so it's easier if I just stay away from people."

"That's horrible! No one should have to exist like that. We'll find a way to help you, I'm sure of it."

You hear Jake and Clayton clomping down the stairs, and turn to look at them.

"Rose said some kind of ghost is down here?" asks Clayton suspiciously. "We had to convince her to come down, is it really that scary?"

“No, of course not. It’s just another girl with a curse, take a look for yourself.”

Jake looked interestedly at Tosha, making his RESolve check, but Clayton got minimum on his, a six, and even adding his cybernetic bonus for resisting magic, he takes a step back.

“I see what you mean, Rose.”

“I told you! It’s a real ghost, we have to get away from it.”

“Are you two serious?” asks Jake, not believing his ears. “You can’t be worried about that girl hurting you?”

“No, I’m just afraid of her, I can’t say why.”

Jake looks back at Tosha. “Can you believe this- what’s wrong?”

Tosha looks like she’s terrified of Clayton.

“What manner of man is this?” she asks, half phased through the wall.

“I’m a cyborg, where have you been?”

“What’s that, some kind of magical construct?”

“No, I’m just part machine. How long have you been down here?”

“I know not.”

“You’ve got some catching up to do.”

“So it seems.”

“She says she’s cursed, and I don’t know much about magic,” you say to Rose. “Just what I’ve picked up from listening to you study, so you can tell better than I can. You’re going to have to work through this fear you’re feeling, can you do that?”

“I can try,” Rose says, hesitantly, making a Magic Sense check and getting a nine. Given the amount of magic currently on this girl, however, even that proves sufficient. “What the heck?”

“What?” Everyone turns to her.

“It’s not just a curse, it’s a bunch of different spells all working together. I’m sorry, I’m still afraid of her, can you move me a little closer? I’m going to close my eyes.”

“Someone else do it!” says Clayton.

“Aw, is widdle baby Clayton afraid of the poor ghosty whosty?” asks Jake.

Suddenly Clayton has a gun out. “I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that, what did you say?”

“I said it must be tough, being under the affect of a magical terror spell!”

“That’s right.”

Jake takes Rose in his hands and walks towards Tosha, and she does have her eyes closed and is concentrating.

“Okay,” she said after a while. “I think I’ve got it all. She has five spells on her right now. The first I’m well familiar with, that’s Phase, making you seem like a ghost. Next is that odd transparency effect which must be some weird Neptune spell I’ve never seen. Invisibility is a grade 3 so this must be like a grade 1 equivalent. Then of course the fear spell. As near as I can tell, your shirt has been Imbued with a sustenance spell so you don’t have to eat or drink, so don’t take it off or that will be broken. The biggest one is the immortality spell keeping her alive. That one takes 24 hours to cast, you must remember that, at least?”

“No,” says Tosha, shaking her head. “I just woke up like this before him, and he told me he had cursed me and to walk the earth forever in despair.”

“Probably some kind of memory altering spell done afterwards. What did you do to the poor guy that made him throw all of that at you?”

“Nothing! I only refused his advances. Many times I admit, but for him to hate me so after that?”

“He did. A curse would have been much easier, but potentially easier to break, too. He really wanted you to suffer.”

“You mean to tell me,” says Clayton, “that some madman put spells on her like the reload spell on my gun? A bunch of them? Doesn’t that cost, like big money and XP and time and whatever else?”

Rose nods. “This took some effort on his part, never doubt it.”

“So this is to be my fate, then?”

Rose considered. “There are a couple of things you could do. Easiest is we bring someone back here that knows how to cast Destroy Magic. They smash every spell at once off of you. You become mortal and tangible again. The fear spell goes away, all of it. Oh, and if you’re a wizard, say goodbye to ever casting spells again.”

“I’m not. So there is hope?” says Tosha, almost smiling.

Rose nods. “The other way is much tougher. I’m not even sure it would work, quite frankly. That is to selectively negate the spells, one at a time, by making their reverses permanent on you as well. Destroy Magic might also work to negate them, one at a time. It does have a long form, which takes about an hour. I’ve never considered making permanent spells as a punishment, so I have no idea how to take one off

at a time. I'll tell you what- I'm going back for a person who knows a lot of Pluto magic and he can cast a spell to negate your Phasing for a little while. Then you can step through the gateway back to the NPC-PS building and have some research done into your problem. How would that be?"

"It is more than I dared to dream! How can I ever thank you?"

"Oh, I could think of one or two ways," Rose mutters. You stifle a laugh. "Be right back. I can't be in your fear field for this, I need to concentrate."

She flutters off and you hear her casting the Teleportal spell upstairs, while Tosha has gotten up and looks happy.

"Truly, I can't thank you enough for what you've done. Even if nothing comes of it, no one has ever tried to help me before. They have only run at the sight of me. But you all came, and now I have hope again that one day I can live a normal life!"

"We found you by accident, and we wouldn't just leave you down here for all eternity."

"When I am back to normal I will somehow repay you, I swear."

"Hey," says Jake, holding a hand up. "We're NPC-PS, saving people is what we do. That's reward enough."

"Speak for yourself," says Clayton.

"I speak for all of us."

"Whatever."

Soon two new people come down the stairs, peering at Tosha. "I see what you mean," says the one.

"What a fascinating case!" says the other.

"Let's get you out of here," says Rose. "They're going to stay away from you so they don't get caught in the fear spell. The negation of your Phase is anchored by the gate, so you can be solid when you step through it. Before you do though, he'll cast Calm on you and maintain it so you're not scaring everyone in the halls."

"It should be quite interesting to see how your various issues can be worked out, we can't wait to get started."

"Magical researchers..." says Rose, shaking her head. We all head up the stairs and watch as Tosha becomes solid again near the portal. Not that there's any physical change, of course. The second man casts a spell, and Clayton reacts.

"Suddenly I'm not afraid of her anymore!"

"Please, will one of you, it's been so long." She holds out her arms.

You know what she needs- a hug.

You oblige her.

“It feels so good to touch again, I hadn’t realized how much I missed it. Thank you all.” Tears are streaming down her face, and you can’t help but feeling for her.

“Don’t worry, they’re good people, and they’ll do what it takes to help you. I know they will.”

She steps back and nods, smiling at each of you through her tears, and then steps through the portal.

“Will you be coming back with us this way?” asks the researcher that’s left.

“We’ll need to bring the car back to the local branch at the very least, and I’m not sure we’re done here. We’ll catch up later,” replies Rose.

“I’ll let you know how it goes,” he says, and steps through himself. The portal winks out.

“Hey, we did some good today!” says Rose, smiling.

“We did, but that girl is probably going to need some heavy counseling sessions. Not to mention a crash course on “the future.” Man, endless days and nights down here, for years and years, she could be two hundred years old!”

“I’m surprised she held together as well as she did,” you say.

“There may have been more magic to keep her sane. After all, if she lost her mind she wouldn’t suffer correctly, right?” asks Rose. “I may not have felt it all, there was a lot of magical interference inside her because of all the spells going on.”

“I guess you’re right. Let’s wrap this up and head back. We didn’t learn anything about our invisible friend, but we did do some good, and that’s enough for one day. I have a feeling we’ll be getting some XP for all this, and I’m in a hurry to spend it.”

“And we have no other leads,” grumps Clayton, “so we’re back to square one anyway. You all know what that means.”

“Guesswork and assumptions?” asks Jake.

“Hopes and Prayers?” you ask.

“Wishes and dreams?” asks Rose.

“Hoping the Narrator throws us a bone,” answers Clayton. Of course he’s right, but he doesn’t have to be such a downer about it, right?

Chapter 13.1

Unexpected Rescue

You are Rose, three weeks later, about to attend a meeting with the others

“Why do we have to do this again?” you ask Jaden, riding her shoulder as usual.

“Clayton feels it’s important, and it is our job,” she answers.

“I guess.”

You enter the meeting room and Jake comes in a moment later and sits down. “How’s the new direction going?” he asks.

“Good,” replies Jaden. “With Rose’s help casting that Augment Skill spell I’ve got several interesting prototype devices finished and ready for field testing.”

“That’s great! I’ve been getting my Illusion skill up enough to learn Masking. I figure if our friend wants to play the invisible card, I might as well hand it right back the only way I can.”

“They won’t be invisible long, I’ve picked up the Visibility spell,” you brag.

“Say, that’s great! You’ve been learning a bunch of magic lately huh?”

You nod. “Being a natural magician does have some benefits.”

“Unfortunately,” says Clayton, who was already sitting at the table when you came in, “none of that helps get us closer to catching this person and putting a stop to their activities!”

“And what have you been doing to that end?” you ask.

“Oh, uh, well, I got some new cybernetics installed, does that count?”

“I thought so. What did you get?” You are interested despite yourself, as Clayton’s eyes look a little different.

“A distancer, some EM sensors and a blood clotting system, complete with healing nano-bots. They can’t heal my arms of course, but if I get shot in the body or leg I should be okay much faster than normal.”

“What’s a distancer?”

“I can look at things and tell how far away they are. It helps me shoot stuff.”

“Well that’s useful.”

“You know, sometimes I have trouble telling when you’re being sarcastic. Maybe I should get some cyber ears? Anyway, once again we’re here to see if anything new has been learned about our mystery assailant.”

“I think he was the one being sarcastic that time,” Jaden whispers to you.

“I think so too.” You turn back to Clayton. “Nothing new. Can we go now?”

“Rose, you have to take this seriously. We have to find this person before another PC goes missing!”

“I know, but how are we ever going to find them?”

“I don’t know, but there must be something. Let’s go over what we do know.”

“Again?” you protest, “this will be the third time.”

“Sorry, again.”

Jake opens his folder and starts laying pieces of paper out. “We know O.I.F, that’s Our Invisible Friend, is going after PCs for some reason. Some are old, some are young, both male and female. They are not limited to any one place on the earth, and they all vanish without a trace. Most PCs are left alone, so it is not suggested this is some plot to destroy all PCs but some kind of personal vendetta. There seems to be no link between the victims, so this idea is tenuous at best. We have no clue why, in other words.

“This has been sporadically going on for at least a hundred years, if not longer. This suggests an immortal wizard, someone with a Regeneration spell going, a cyborg, or maybe a dragon or some other long lived creature. It could also be a group of people who have handed the task down to a younger generation. O.I.F. could therefore be a red herring. Some kind of golem, or Plastic Proxy, animated at a distance and made invisible to further reduce the danger of capture.

“O.I.F. has at least twice teleported a victim away to a second location. At least once shipped them out from there to at least a third location using mules who we caught and were questioned. They knew nothing about Belquis, the girl in the ice. No further attempt was made to take Belquis again. We can’t say what would have happened to Clayton or us, had we fallen into the same trap. Because Clayton did what Clayton does best- violence.”

“Actually,” breaks in Clayton, “my best skill is-” he looks at his

character sheet. “Oh, yeah, it’s my combat skill group, including pistol. Sorry, carry on.”

“This person seems to plan way in advance, setting up controllable situations and traps in case things go wrong. They seem big on diversions if something does go wrong. Also they know tech or employed someone to jam all radio signals where Clayton went to. Though that could have been done by magic, it’s hard to know for sure. This suggests someone with a fair amount of intelligence or experience, which again could point to someone old or a group.”

“Basically,” you say, “we have no leads or clues of any kind, like last week, and the week before that.”

“That seems to be the case.”

“Could we tag every PC on the planet? There can’t be that many of them,” suggests Jaden.

“We could, if you wanted to violate every privacy law that ever was. Besides, just waiting for someone to be taken doesn’t sit well with me. If they’re taken to an area with interference, we would know they were gone, but not to where. Wouldn’t help,” answers Clayton.

“I’ve talked to the other wizards around here, scrying spells don’t work, they’ve tried. Whoever this is probably has some sort of concealment spell going as well as invisibility.”

“Probably why they’ve been able to operate for so long. Whoever it is, they’re very careful.”

“We can’t exactly set a trap, either. We know what O.I.F. wants, PCs, but they’re just walking around out there, ready for the taking!” says Jake.

“We have to think of something,” says Jaden, “This person is out there laughing at us right now while we sit here!”

“If they aren’t dead from Clayton shooting them full of holes,” you point out, glaring at him.

“Would you rather I be missing right now?”

“Wait a minute, that’s a good point.”

“What is?”

“Didn’t you say you tried to get the license plate number of the van that was going to carry you away, but the angle wasn’t right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“We can use the Time Frame again, head back there, and see where that truck came from. It’s visible, after all. Maybe we can get some answers from the driver.”

We all looked at each other. It seemed like our only option at this point.

We had a lead!

“So what is it?” asked Jake, turning the frame over and over in his hands. We were currently driving back to the site of the fire, having gathered what we needed into our inventories (mostly Jaden’s new gadgets). I had Teleported us to the other NPC-PS building, where she quickly finished them up. Clayton, having even more cybernetics now went through last. This collapsed the portal, which was fine.

“It’s an imbued object, just like our bracelets or your ring,” you explain. “The spell on it is Time Window, which usually makes an immobile area that can see into the past. Put on the frame, it can move, because it’s the frame that’s moving, dragging the spell along with it. We’ll find the time the truck drove up, then tell the frame to go normal speed, reverse, and just follow it back to where it came from. That’s why we’re driving, rather than just going there directly.”

“Nice, that should lead us to someone interesting.”

“No doubt, as we have cards again, unlike our last little mission.”

“It’s not like we were in any danger there,” Jaden says.

“Still, it would have been nice to have the option of turning some in for XP.”

Having reached the site we backed through time until the truck backed (from our perspective) into place and a punk looking guy got out. He walked backwards away from the scene, and left the area. He had a cyber leg, a bizarre hairdo and tattoos all over himself. A pleasant fellow, you have no doubt.

“Why did he leave?” Jaden asks. “That seems odd.”

“O.I.F. probably told him to,” answers Jake, “so when they loaded Clayton up he wouldn’t see it happen. Then he wouldn’t know what he was transporting, which would fit the pattern that we experienced.”

“So do we follow where he goes from here, or back further to see where he came from?” asks Clayton.

“I suspect it might be the same place,” Jake answers. “Let’s go.”

We follow the truck through the city, now running time the right way, though we do have to pause it at times because the traffic patterns are different. We have a siren though, and a car with lights on it, so it isn’t

too much of an issue. The truck is driven for maybe twenty minutes to a loading bay near a train station, and is met by two other men. They all have at least one cybernetic replacement and weird hair + tattoos. They open up and check the back of the truck, and don't seem surprised to not find anything. They close it up, and the two others jump on motorcycles and take off, the original guy right behind them. They drive back to the bad section of town they just left, and pull into a large building with a garage door big enough to accommodate the truck.

"So they must have had some agreement with O.I.F. to keep the truck there at certain times, then unload whatever they found inside. This must be their home turf," says Clayton. "I say we bust in and get some answers."

"At least let me go in and check the place out invisibly, we don't want any surprises."

"I already see there's five cyborgs in there, all in close proximity. We can take them!"

"There are five, my detect enemies magic tells me that. I'm going in anyway," you say, getting out your wand. You cast Phase on yourself, then go invisible, passing through the wall and into the interior. You check the place out, and like Clayton said, there are five people there. One appears to be sleeping, two are playing some kind of video game, one is tinkering with a beat up robot and finally one is working on his bike. You check each room to make sure there's no one else, and are shocked to discover a naked woman chained to a bed!

She's unconscious or asleep, and is badly bruised throughout her entire body. Even so, she's so helpless and vulnerable you can't help feeling a longing towards her, curse you Easily Infatuated weakness! You have to help her, and her current state seems to suggest she won't be raising any sort of alarm if you do. You quietly cast Regeneration on her and wait for her wounds to go away. You don't have to wait long, and she stirs, blinking and looking down at herself.

"I'm here to rescue you!" you whisper to her, floating over to her ear. "But be quiet about it!"

"Where are you?" she whispers back. Oh, what a sweet voice she has! *Focus Rose*, you chide yourself.

"I'm invisible, and I have some friends outside. If I get you out can you tell us about this gang?"

"I'll do anything you want if you can get me out of here!"

Naughty thoughts, no naughty thoughts. She doesn't mean it the

way you want her to mean it. “Do you feel okay? I need to know if you’re all the way healed so I can drop that spell.”

“I think so.”

“I can always cast it again later if you need me to. Now how are we going to get these chains off you?”

“I don’t know where the key is, sorry.”

“I could just go get my friends, they’re about to storm the place for a different reason anyway.”

“You mean Blitz didn’t send you?”

“Who?”

“My boyfriend. Never mind, please, don’t leave me, they may come back any minute, you have to get me out of here.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll shrink you, and I’ll try to do it slow so you can slip out of those chains.”

“However, just hurry up.”

You drop Regeneration, and cast shrink, putting four extra energy into it, bringing her to a size -5, small enough for you to carry.

“Did you have to go that far?” she asks, now dwarfed by the bed. You drop Phase, remembering an open window you saw earlier you could fly through. While you could have just used Teleportal to get her out, why waste the energy? Carrying this naked woman to safety has nothing to do with it. At all. Still, usually you get bigger for Jaden, it might be nice to turn the tables and make her smaller for once... your thoughts seem to be straying again, so you swoop down and pick up the tiny lady.

“Goodness,” she says, “am I being rescued by a fairy?”

“That’s right, now stay quiet, we’re getting out of here.” Good thing you’re pretty strong, for a fairy, you easily dart into the room with the open window and out into the street again. You turn visible and fly over to your friends, mission accomplished! Wait, why were you here again?

The others seem confused as you fly over with this tiny naked person, and you set her down behind Jaden. “Just a second,” you say, forestalling any explanation, and start casting the lengthy Creation spell to make her a sheet. She will want to cover herself, you suppose. You could try for a dress, but you don’t know how well that would work. Her size is a little hard to tell at the moment. You tell her to crawl underneath and then you let the Shrink spell go, bringing her back to her normal size.

“Explanation now?” Clayton demands, crossly.

“I found her!”

“You don’t get to keep her.”

“She was chained to a bed!”

“What?”

“Who are you people? Why are you here, if it’s not for me?”

“We’re with NPC-PS, miss,” says Jake. “We’re here about a truck that was going to be used in an abduction attempt, driven by one of the people in this building. Do you know anything about that?”

“Do I ever! That’s why Blitz left and why I got beaten up. He said the gang shouldn’t be doing that kind of thing, no questions asked work like that. The others said the money was too good to pass up. So he left the gang and I paid the price. They grabbed me two weeks ago and, you can guess what they did.”

“She was all beat up when I found her,” you say. “I healed her.”

“I’m starving though, they didn’t bring me much to eat or drink. Right now I just want to get out of here.”

“Rose, Teleportal her back to the nearer NPC-PS base, she’ll need to give a statement. Then get back here. We’ll need to talk to these fellows awhile. Is there anything we should know about them before we storm the place?”

“They’re all average fighters, of course, no PCs like you. You shouldn’t have any problems, there’s only two guns in the place. One guy uses a chain, the guy with the big cyber arm punches stuff, and one guy likes throwing knives.”

“That helps, thanks.”

“Thank you for getting me out of there!”

You make the portal, another energy gone, and fly through with her, so you can tell them what you need them to do for you. They say they’ll send a wagon to collect the others when you’re done with them.

You fly back to see Jake and Clayton arguing over their course of action now.

“Clayton just wants to rush in, Jake says that we should just call the police and have them arrested through normal channels,” Jaden explains.

“What do you think?”

“I think I’d just mess things up if we went in there, but you know Clayton is so trigger happy, he might accidentally kill someone.”

“You won’t mess up, you’re great, remember? And it’s not like

they're using magical weapons that can actually hurt you."

"I guess you're right. But I just don't want to storm in there and start beating them up."

"Did you *see* what they did to that girl? And they were just going to deliver Clayton on ice to O.I.F."

"I know, I know, it's just I'm so much more powerful than them, it's not fair."

"What they did to her was?"

"Just because they don't act with honor doesn't give me leave to act the same way."

You sigh. "Okay, tell you what- you go in there, and tell them to surrender. Obviously they will attack you, allowing you to defend yourself and fight with honor. You knock them over, I'll Immobilize them with magic, nobody gets killed."

"That would satisfy honor, wouldn't it? Boys, I'm going in with Rose, you can be our backup."

"Are you crazy?" Jake and Clayton say.

"No, Invulnerable. You two will heal, but a lucky shot will still kill you, right?"

This is uncomfortably close to the truth, and both of them know it.

"Neither of us can be hurt by these guys, so just come in when it's over, okay?"

"Is there a place we could watch from, at least?" Clayton asks you.

"Not unless you want to peek in through the windows."

He shakes his head. "Have fun or whatever."

"I think I just might do that," Jaden answers. "As it is, I get to use this card after all. I declare, card 23, taking these guys down myself."

"You could have just said that," Clayton says, glumly.

Chapter 13.2

Unexpected Rescue

You are Jaden, about to show these boys who's the boss around here. Hint: it's you

“Do you want any spells before we go in?” asks Rose.

“Actually, slap Augment Skill on me, martial arts, just for fun. That doesn't give you too large a penalty, does it?”

“Nah, only a two. You got it.”

Rose casts on you, and you get a good feeling now that your Kung Fu rating is a fifteen. “Let's do this,” you say, grinning.

You walk over to the door and decide it's in your way. You smash a flurry of kicks through it, spending four energy to up your TR by two, just in case the lock and the frame are both metal instead of wood. You get a 16 on damage, and the door busts open. The guy working on his motorcycle looks over, surprise written all over his face. Metaphorically, of course. He does have a literal tattoo on his face, but it doesn't read “surprise.” You don't want to know what it reads.

“Nice entrance,” says Rose.

“I am Jaden Shan from NPC-PS and I know you have a girl upstairs against her will. You can either get down on the ground and put your hands over your head, or we can do this the hard way.”

Motorcycle guy seems confused and looks over at the guy working on the robot. He pulls a gun out and shoots you, which seems an odd greeting. Naturally, the bullets bounce off.

“I guess we're doing it the hard way,” you say, pleased. You charge at motorcycle guy who is staring at you in surprise, given how he expected you to be dead. Showing off your fifteen skill with a perfectly executed flip maneuver, you drive your foot into his no doubt hollow cranium.

He takes eight damage to the head. Not enough to knock him out, but the force of the blow causes him to be driven into the ground, and the fight is on!

The guy with the gun starts shooting again, and though it can't hurt you, if this guy misses he'll hit his buddy by accident. You don't want that. You dodge his bullets to get away from the guy on the ground. You

take your quarter move as part of the dodge, and reach the table with the robot the guy was working on. On your next action you'll vault over it in a way that would no doubt impress the most jaded of circus fans. Rose darts over to the guy holding his head and says, "You should just stay down there, if you know what's good for you." Figuring that he doesn't, she starts casting Immobilize.

There's some shouting and commotion from another room off to the left, probably the three others reacting to the gunshots. A guy with a chain appears in the doorway, in front of a guy with a bladed cyber arm. You are still not ready to act, that called shot to the head really messed you up. If you hadn't done the called that it would mean you would be ready by now. Oh well. Rose finishes casting, rolls a twenty, and even spending max energy, with this guy's penalty he's going nowhere, so bands of force wrap him up.

The guy shooting you decides to continue shooting you, given how close you are. He can't believe how fast you moved and figures he just missed the first time. There's no way he can miss now, right? You chuckle at his inept thinking and make a called shot to the gun as a reactive martial arts action, your 10 REFlexes serving you well once again. You sweep your leg over the table in a mostly impossible way, but which your Kung Fu skill allows you to perform easily, and get a 27, solidly connecting with the gun. Unfortunately that means nothing in this world, as your actual damage roll turns out only to be a five. As gun guy here rolls a thirteen to resist you, he holds onto his gun. You follow up with your other leg, going for the whole hog, and aiming your feet at this guy's head too. You inwardly sigh at the additional delay all this is going to cost you. Of course he spends max energy on his dodge as well, so you miss, swinging around and coming to your feet again. Off to the side you see the two that just entered leap over the banister on the stairs and come running at you, chain guy in the lead. He whips his chain around you, which you decide could be useful, and block it with your left arm so it wraps around.

He smiles, thinking he has you right where we wants you, when really it's the other way around. The guy with the cyber arm closes on you, his arm transparently raised and leaving himself wide open. You grab the edge of the table with your right hand and the chain in your left, then flip yourself over backwards as only a martial artist of your magically enhanced caliber could ever hope to achieve. (You got a 27 on the maneuver) The table goes flying into gun guy, and chain guy goes flying

into fist guy, losing his chain and everyone goes sprawling.

Everyone but you, of course, as you neatly land on your feet, completing the maneuver. *That worked rather well*, you think. You hear a pounding from the direction these guys came from, it sounds like the fifth gang member will be joining you shortly. Too bad none of these boys are your type, given how they're falling all over themselves to be near you. Rose zips over and sits on your shoulder, giving you an appreciative look.

"Yeah, that's what I would have done," she says, looking down at the cyborgs now struggling to get back up. She whips her wand around and calls on fire, aiming an Elemental Bolt of fire at the gun, still held in gunman number one's hand. He does try to get it out of the way but misses it by one. Meaning the gun takes the full brunt of the fire and thus, thirteen damage, nearly slugging it. Naturally he drops it now, it's useless, and too hot to handle anymore.

The second gunman steps into view, sees one of his fellows bound in magical force bands and three others at the feet of this weird girl in uniform and concentrates on his gun after pointing it. You're shocked, literally, as what looks like lightning leaps out of the barrel instead of a bullet. You throw yourself to one side and easily dodge it, but you're pretty sure that would actually hurt you if it hit you.

"That's an Imbued weapon!" Rose shouts, hanging onto you now. "No fair!"

You're still recovering from all those called shots you were making earlier, you can't act yet, and it looks like chain guy is going to be fully up soon. You are still holding his choice of weapons though, so he probably won't be that much of a threat. In fact the only thing you're really concerned about in the room is that lightning gun.

"Want me to take it out?" Rose asks, swishing her wand.

"No, Clayton may want it, just Immobilize him," you answer.

"But he can't- oh whatever," and she quickly casts the spell, using three extra energy, as this guy seems to have both a cyber arm and a leg. She gets a 17, but with the penalty for rushing the spell, plus his cybernetics means his STrength check of 14 is enough to bust out of it.

"Grab her," he shouts, as the guy minus chain gets up.

"Are you nuts?" he shouts back, but tries anyway, meaning you get a reactive action against him, choosing the simple expediency of nailing him in the gut. You don't even bother trying to dodge. You connect, doing ten damage to his body, not enough to drop him but enough to make

him think twice about trying to grab you again. Some people just have to learn the hard way, you know? Chainless guy staggers back a little.

The first gunman physically throws himself at you, trying to knock you to the ground. You facilitate his airborne journey of self discovery by catching his hands in your own, rolling yourself backwards as you plant your feet on his chest, and swooshing him behind you. He goes skidding along the concrete floor rather ungracefully, face first. Naturally you just keep rolling and are on your feet again instantly.

“Wheeeeeee” shouts Rose, still clinging to your shoulder.

“Incompetence, all of you are brimming with it!” says the second gunman, willing another lighting bolt at you. You have to dodge that one as well, shouting to Rose “How many of those does he have in there?”

She thinks for a second. “Twenty-five divided by three. You’re the new math wiz around here, you figure it out.”

You have been studying math, actually, it’s a requirement for the design and fabrication work you’ve been doing. So about eight then, sigh.

Rose starts casting again, taking extra time this time by the looks of it, but still getting it off before you can actively act again. All this dodging is annoying! She tries Immobilizing him again, which sticks this time. The second gunman goes toppling over, bands of force around him as well. *Oh, never mind then, guess it doesn’t matter how many he has.*

“I’m at minus five now,” she whispers to you, so they don’t know how tapped out she is.

“Understood,” you say back, finally able to act again. Chain guy and the guy with the funny arm both look ready to act again, so you roll a close combat check to see who you should tackle first. Whoops, you roll minimum, but which still beats their two rolls, and you know all three of you will act simultaneously.

That cyber arm isn’t magic, so there’s not much point in your dodging a punch. You throw a flurry of blows at each, using your off hand to hit the ex-chain guy, and holding back so you don’t kill him by accident. You hit the first guy for a measly five, but as you didn’t declare a called shot, you hit his right arm, the one that’s coming straight for you. You don’t damage it, though he does seem surprised that he doesn’t damage you, and do an additional four damage to the other guy, dropping him.

Behind you, the first gunman gets up and does something he thinks is pretty smart. He’s seen you move, but he’s also seen that the fairy has

to wave that little wand of hers around to cast spells! Maybe he can use her as a hostage? He makes a grab for Rose, getting maximum and grabbing her, yanking her off your shoulder.

“Hey!” you shout, whirling around.

He puts his fingers aside her head and says “Back off lady, or your fairy friend here gets it.”

“Really?” you ask, unconcerned. “You’re going to pick on a poor, defenseless fairy now?”

“Unless you let me walk out of here right now...” he says, twisting a little.

“Oh, stop, ow ow ow, you’re hurting me, stop,” says Rose, hamming it up. “You brute, you monster, you... help me out here Jaden.”

“Slime ball? Scum of the earth?”

“Yeah, those too!”

“I don’t think you’re taking me seriously!”

You shake your head. “You want me to do something?”

“Nah, I’m fine, you take the other guy, I got this.”

“Okay,” you say, whirling back around to hopefully do some damage to this guy that’s trying to punch you, before he hurts himself. The guy holding Rose makes a noise like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

You pull off a very nice set of blows at the arm guy, hitting him in the chest and doing enough damage to knock him out too. That just leaves just the guy holding Rose, who is now looking directly at him. You fold your arms, seemingly annoyed.

“Well, mine is down, are you going to do something today?”

“You’ll- You’ll be sorry!” shouts the gunman, giving Rose’s head a twist. Of course she’s as Invulnerable as you are, and he has no success.

“There’s something you don’t know about fairies,” says Rose, as he struggles to snap her neck. “But I’m happy to educate you. Watch.”

Then she gets bigger. Twice as big as him, actually, tearing her out of his grip and shoving him back.

“I declare,” you say. “Card 44.” That will make sure he won’t be able to do anything but gape at her for ten segments. This will assure that she goes first, which she does. She, surprisingly, does a Kung Fu move and smashes a flurry of punches into his body. This is after declaring card 22 to make up for her awful result. No sense in doing all this cool stuff if you’re going to miss, right? She also puts maximum energy into her damage roll, getting a good result and staggering the guy.

“When did you learn that?” you ask, surprised.

“Didn’t think I’d been watching you all these years without putting a few points in Kung Fu myself, did you?” she smirks. “You going to give up?” she says, looming over the guy. He puts his hands on his head. “I surrender.”

Rose shrinks again, and you handcuff the guy as Clayton and Jake stroll in.

“Ten seconds,” says Clayton. “Not bad, but I probably could have done it in five.”

“With how many dead?” asks Rose icily.

“I hit what I aim at, it doesn’t have to be lethal, you know.”

The goons are all sliding over into the center of the room, as Jake waves his hands at them. He then checks them for injuries and uses Healing Acceleration on them so they’ll come round. After handcuffing everyone, of course. Rose lets the magic go, and soon enough everyone is glumly sitting in a heap in the center of the floor.

“There were more of you?” asks gunman one. “We got taken out by one little girl and a fairy?”

“I told him we should have invested in more magic,” says the chain guy. “But would he listen to me? Nooooo.”

“We’re a cyber gang,” says the lighting gun guy, “We don’t do magic. I only have that gun because it was... my grandfather’s, I told you that!”

“I thought you said your uncle gave it to you?”

“Never mind that! We’re in big trouble here!”

“Yes, you are,” says Clayton, examining the gun in question. “For the girl alone, you’re doing some time in the big house, you know that, right?”

They all glower at him.

“Did you all have her, or was she reserved for the boss man, which I take is you?” He puts the gun up to the guy’s head.

“You really can’t threaten me with that, there’re no bullets in that gun,” he sneers.

“Seems to have been plenty lighting though, wonder if I can make some come out?”

“You can’t, idiot. You have cyber arms, and it takes energy to activate spells. That’s why I use it with my real hand and not my cyber one. Don’t you know anything?”

“You don’t want to make me angry you know,” Clayton says, Quick Drawing one of his pistols from his inventory. “Like I said, I hit what I

aim at, and it doesn't have to be fatal."

He pales a little. The others remain silent, you know he has to be pretty scared to tell you what you want to know.

"So arrest us and send us to jail already. The girl is upstairs in the forth room on the right."

"Oh, we know, we rescued her before Jaden even came in here."

The guys look surprised. "Then, what, if she's gone... huh?"

"Not too bright, huh?" says Clayton. "Must be all those blows to the head. I'll spell it out for you. She was never our concern, we're here because of the truck." He points.

"We rented that legitimately!" protests the guy with the knife arm. "We can show you the paperwork!"

"It's not the truck, stupid, it's what you were going to drive in the truck to the train station and load onto that boxcar that was waiting. Namely, me, or one of my friends here. We want to know who put you up to it."

They look confused. "We don't know," the knife thrower, who didn't get to do anything given he was the first to fall, says. "This invisible--"

"Don't tell them anything!" says the second gunman.

"You better tell us everything," cautions Clayton. "You're in for kidnapping, assault, rape, attempted kidnapping, attempted murder, resisting arrest, and one of you ran a red light coming back here, need I go on? You help us now, and maybe, just maybe, we'll put in a good word for you with the judge who sentences you. We might forget though. The better the story we hear right now, the more grateful we'll be, and the greater the chance we'll remember."

"It's not like we know anything anyway," says the arm guy.

"Oh, do what you like, you're all dead to me." says the gunman.

"Now look what you've done, you've gone and hurt his feelings!" the other gunman says.

"I thought we were like family," the other says, a tear coming to his eye. "But now I see we were just people who knew each other, back in the day."

"No, it isn't like that, tell him it isn't like that," says knife guy to Clayton.

"Are you guys for real?" asks Clayton. "Just talk!"

"Okay, okay, like he said," says the chain guy. "This invisible person came to us and paid us to rent the truck, drive out to the place and

have it ready during certain hours. We had to leave it there and come back later. We would then drive it to the train station and wait a few minutes, then we would come back here. The money appeared as long as we did the job.”

“How much came?”

“Not much. It was \$1000 a day, and we only rented the truck a couple of days.”

“Let’s see it.”

“The last bag is still here, it’s over in that room.” he gestures with this head.

“Check it out,” he says to Jake, who nods and jogs over there.

“It fits the pattern,” says Rose. “I don’t think they can really help us.”

“This is nuts,” says Clayton. “All this effort, and still nothing to show for it. Okay, I’ve got an idea. I declare, card 29 as card 17, give me something, Narrator, I’m begging you.”

There’s a pause.

“If we help you catch this person, we get off, right?”

“Why, you got something?” asks Clayton suspiciously, kneeling down.

“No, don’t give it to him!” says Gunman #2.

“Yeah, even I know that’s too much,” says gunman #1.

“Hey, I don’t want to rot in jail, okay? I’m giving it to them.”

“Giving us what, exactly?”

“When the invisible person left, there was a really long hair we found on the floor, so we figured it belonged to them. We kept it, just in case, you know? I don’t know much about magic, but we figured it could come in handy. It’s in a drawer upstairs, I can show you.”

Clayton hauled him up. “Go with Jaden, but she will kick your butt again if you try anything. You don’t even need my guarantee to know that by now.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

He leads you to a room upstairs and has you open one of the drawers. He tells you to empty it until you find a plastic bag with a hair in it. He was right, it’s all curled up and very long, looks blond if the not so great light in here is any indication.

Is this the break you’ve been hoping for? You go down to tell the others, and get these cyber punks out of here.

Chapter 14.1

Rescue, aftermath

You are the Observer, standing in a jail cell with five cyber punks

“So do you think they bought it?” asks one to the other in a whisper.

“You better hope they did, or we’re all dead,” replies one.

“I honestly didn’t think that one girl could take us all down like that. Even accounting for Invulnerability, she moved pretty well. Still, did she have to trash the place?”

“I don’t think flipping a table over is trashing the place.”

“I was working on a robot there, you know?”

“What do you think it’s all about?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Invisible person paid me money to get beat up and then provide that hair to whoever came, and someone came. We made it seem real and they went away. We did our part, so hopefully they’re happy.”

“Yeah, you saw what she did to Kim.” They all shudder. “That was just a sample of what we had coming if we failed, that’s what the figure said. I hated leaving her chained up there like that, but what could we do?”

“Not even Kung Fu lady moved like that, I see the difference now. I wouldn’t want to get between those two in a fight, but I think the NPC-PS girl would have real trouble with that one.”

“Must have been magic.”

“Must have been.”

There’s a pause.

“We’ll get out, right?”

“Hey, at least in here we’re safe? Better in jail than dead!”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

“What was the deal with that gun anyway?”

“Realism, I guess? We couldn’t have hurt her otherwise, so that made it more believable.”

“Could be. How did the invisible person know it would be her we were fighting?”

“Maybe she figured we’d be fighting all of them, and whoever had that gun should focus on her.”

“I guess. Still, your uncle gave it to you? What was that all about?”

“I didn’t say my uncle, someone else said uncle. I said grandfather!”

“We all said uncle because you can’t shoot straight.”

You wonder what that has to do with anything.

“Sorry, I tried my best. It’s not every week two people bust in and attack you, even in this city, you know?”

“One person and a fairy.”

“She doesn’t count as a person?”

“If a girl and her pet dragon busted in you wouldn’t say ‘two people’ would you?”

“A fairy is person... shaped.”

“So is a zombie, but I wouldn’t call that a person either.”

“I guess. How did we ever get mixed up in this?”

“That job Blitz took, that’s how. Just drive a truck and leave it, he says. Then drive it someplace else, he says. Easy money my shiny metal butt.”

“Why would you have that cybered?”

“It’s a figure of speech, you know?”

“I really hope we get out of here.”

“I know, you guys are driving me crazy.”

Chapter 15.1

Possibilities of Magic

You are Rose, currently at the NPC-PS wizard's classes.

The classroom you are in has several other students, all practicing one sort of magic or another. At first glance it looks like a normal classroom. However, if the Observer cared to stay and watch, and they have no choice but to do so at the moment, they would see students coming and going. There is no set lesson here, rather each student asking the instructor for specific advice on raising their skills or learning new spells. Unlike a typical classroom that runs at a set hour, this one is open at all hours of the day. In the course of a day one or a hundred students may stop in for a lesson. Of course all are NPC-PS agents of one kind or another, needing help with their current, or future missions.

This holds true for you, as well.

“So how exactly does divination magic work?” you ask the instructor.

“I am tempted to say exactly in the same manner that every other kind of magic works,” he replies, “but I fear that is not the answer you’re looking for.”

“No it’s not, but give it to me from the beginning anyway.”

“Very well. Divination magic falls under the ascendancy of Jupiter, governed by RESolve. Jupiter also represents order, truth, punishment and connection. To cast Jupiter spells, one must mentally force the magic to respond to your wishes, rather than through, for example, STrength as with Mars. As with all magic, the intent of the spell is spoken aloud while invoking the mystic energies that power it. If you have the proper force of will to control those energies and sufficient practice in this skill, the magic will respond to your wishes and the spell will be performed successfully.”

“But what if performing it successfully isn’t enough?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” says the instructor quizzically. “If you succeed, the spell works. If you don’t, you have to worry about backlash, same as with any other planet. The magical energies, having

no place else to go, damage you instead of performing their task.”

“I know that, what I need to do is find someone. A person that seems to be invisible a lot of the time and is a wizard themselves. So they probably have a lot of anti-scrying magic going around where they are.”

“In that case, your casting result must only beat their casting result for the protection spell they have used. Then your spell will succeed.”

“That’s doable,” you say, thoughtful. “I could use Energetic Accumulation and put most of my energy into it. That would punch through any sort of protection they had.”

“Is this person that skilled then?”

“Perhaps not, but they have shown themselves to think things through obsessively and try to counter any situation before it happens.”

“I see. One moment please, I’ll be right back.”

He leaves and returns a few moments later with a book of Jupiter magic. He starts paging through it.

“It’s still going to be tricky, you know,” he says, looking over certain spells. “First of all you’ll have to learn Jupiter magic to at least a rating of one, which is easily done, of course.”

“Of course.”

“The only spell I can see that would actually work is Descry Owner, using the hair to ask the magic to show you the person it came from. The thing is, this spell shows you the person as though you were looking at them, which would be problematic if what you say it true.”

“Invisibility,” you say, darkly.

“Exactly. So this person’s planning has served them well. Still, if this person is out and about, you can maintain the spell until you see a landmark or street sign, and have a good idea where they are.”

“That does sound promising.”

“How much XP do you have?”

“Right now?” You get out your character sheet and have a look. “With my last mini adventure with Jaden, I now have nine.”

“That’s cutting it close, this is a grade eight spell, leaving you with one XP left over which you’ll have to put into Jupiter.”

“Can I cast it from the writings?”

“Not from *my* book,” he says, shocked.

“Why not?”

“If you fail casting it, the writings will be destroyed by the backlash! And if it’s part of the book, most likely the whole book would go

up in flames.”

“Oh. Let’s avoid that possibility, shall we?”

“Indeed. I can have someone make you a copy. The casting time is ten minutes, mind you. You’ll have your work cut out for you, reading and casting it that way.”

“Let me at least try it.”

“The risk is yours to take. How are your skills of Magical Theory and Scripture, if I may ask?”

“Both slightly above average.”

“If you take your time you should be all right. I’ll get you started learning to cast Jupiter spells so you can spend the one XP and get this spell copied over to some new pages for you by tomorrow.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.”

Having learned Jupiter to a rating of one, you go in search of Jaden, to see if she’s doing anything interesting. You find her in the workshop, working on one of her devices.

“What’cha doing?” you say, flying over to her.

It looks like she’s working on some small, flat, disk like objects, and is currently gluing a strip of metal into the side of some jeans.

“Hi Rose, did you get what you were looking for?”

“It’s not perfect, but I think we have a shot now that we have that hair.”

“That’s great! You wanted to know about these?”

You nod, landing on the table before them and looking them over.

“They’re something I came up with fighting all those cyborgs,” she explains, holding one up to you. “They weren’t so bad because they were mostly human. But what if I had to fight a full body replacement cyborg? I need a way to take someone like that down fast, so this is what I came up with!”

“What’s it do?” you ask, taking a step away from it.

“I’m glad you asked,” she says with a smile. “It took all of my skills to put together, electronics, energetics, mechanical and 3d fabrication, for the case. Here,” she shows you one that’s still in pieces. It looks like two tiny plates stuck together with some goo along the edges, a little circuitry, and a rod going up the middle. “Basically I stick them onto this magnetic strip which keeps the arming pin in the down position. When I’m done gluing this into my jeans I’m going to make a glove with an electromagnet in the palm.” She stands up and holds it against her leg

with her left hand. “So, as my palm snaps down the magnet picks it up, right?” she demonstrates, now holding the disk in her right palm, which takes up most of it. “Now the pin slides up to hit against the switch here at the top, arming it. The glove will have a motion sensor in it so when I slam my palm against something, the electromagnet will release and the force of the blow will shift the middle rod back away from the switch. This will release the energy stored in the capacitor material along the rod and fry whatever electronics it comes in contact with.”

“What’s a capacitor?” you ask, not following all that but still impressed with the work she’s done.

“It’s like a battery, but it discharges a lot faster. They’ve come a long way in the last fifty years. You can store a ton of power in a very small space, and with no dangerous chemicals like a battery. Basically this paste material is created by nanobots, tiny machines, to have a tremendous surface area, which can store power.”

“Oh, is that all?” you ask. “Kind of like using a Shrink spell on a tree. The tree still has all that energy it soaked up from the sun, it’s just a lot smaller area.”

“I guess you could think of it like that.”

“And you did all this yourself?”

“I had some help,” she says, gesturing to the other people in the lab. “When I explained my idea they really got behind it, because anyone can use it. So they’ve been working with me all day today.”

You look over at another group, hard at work at various tables, computers and manufacturing equipment scattered about the room, and several wave to you. You wave back. One guy walks over with a set of the top and bottom plates. “Here’s the next set,” he says, handing them to Jaden.

“Thanks Paul,” she says, “Keep churning them out!”

“Will do!” He walks away.

Jaden looks them over. “These are printed on that machine over there he’s running. Of course 3D printing with plastics has been around forever, so it’s not tough, but you do have to watch the machine and make sure it behaves. The tolerances for something like this aren’t too bad, so it’s not really a big deal. He enjoys it, so I let him print the stuff even though I could do it myself.”

You look around at the other various projects on the table.

“Looks like you’ve been making some progress on this other stuff.”

“If you don’t mind hanging out here I could use a little magic boost, if you know what I mean? Maybe I can finish them up today. If we’re going to be going after O.I.F. soon I may need every piece of gear I can get my hands on.”

You nod. “Anything I can do to help.”

Several tense days pass as you help Jaden finish up most of her projects and let everyone spend that XP they received. You study the spell, reading it over a couple of times in case you need to actually memorize it, and then get together with everyone again.

“So what’s going to happen?” asks Clayton, as Jaden brings out the papers that have the spell written on them. You can’t exactly fit them into your inventory, after all, it’s all you could do to carry them. Not because the paper is particularly heavy, but the sheets are taller than you are. She spreads them out on the table and you land next to the first page. There are ten of them, a daunting task, hopefully you’re up to it.

“The spell normally takes ten minutes to cast, but doing it this way will take twenty. Please don’t interrupt me. If it goes off, I’ll be able to see what this person is doing right now, and where they are. Hopefully, as they are not expecting this, I can get a good look and figure out where we can go to capture them. If not I don’t know how we’ll find them. I’m going to put the maximum energy I can into this effort in the hope of smashing through any barriers that are up. I’ll be pretty wiped out afterwards. Get to them and capture them, okay?”

The others nod.

“Good luck Rose,” says Jake.

“I know you can do it!” says Jaden.

“Get on with it,” says Clayton.

You glower at him, and start casting the first spell you know you’ll need to succeed. Technically you first check you cards, and sure enough, everyone has new ones, including one you’ll want to spend first.

“I declare card 35,” you say, and the black haired girl jumping with palm-palms appears, then fades out. Everyone gets another card, and they nod to you appreciatively. You silently turn in card 46 for 3 XP, it’s a good card but you may need that XP for an automatic success. You watch as it fades off your character sheet and increases your XP by 3.

Now you can cast your energy gathering spell, that makes this whole thing possible. Time to start carefully reading the ten pages of magical instructions. Eight minutes later you’ve read the whole thing

and make a Magical Scripture check. (After declaring card 36 so you get a slight mental boost for this check) You get a 15 on that. You breathe a sigh of relief, the first check is over and you clearly understand the workings of the spell. Now if you can just make your Magical Theory check to understand how to cast it- you make the check and get a nine.

Obviously, this is not enough, so you spend two of the XP you just received from cards. That makes it a thirteen, which is enough, and start the tedious twenty minutes of casting you have to do. As you are about to complete the spell you pause, holding onto it. Using your newly understood ability to “store” energy you begin gathering it. Finally, as the final magical energies are taken from you, you make a Jupiter check and spend 35 energy, getting a final result of forty five on the check. You feel the barriers in your way easily punctured by the magical energies you’ve unleashed, and you see... an empty room.

In the room is a computer, and various notes are being looked at, as the mouse is moved by an invisible hand. Charts, test results and the like hang nearby and cover the walls, and a second monitor shows someone chained up in what looks like a dungeon. The mouse pauses, and the chair moves a little, almost as if the invisible figure is looking behind themselves, and then a new text document is opened on the screen.

Hello, Rose, the figure types. Finally came to have a look at me, did you?

Oh crap, you think to yourself. This person had some kind of detection spell going as well as the protection spells! Just how paranoid are they?

Don’t worry, I’m not mad, the typing continued. In fact I’ve been waiting for you quite excitedly. Nice work with the ship, by the way, you really drove the people around there nuts figuring out where it came from. You’ll make an excellent data point in my studies, I have no doubt. But we can talk about that when we meet in person. Of course I’m not just going to tell you where I am, that wouldn’t prove anything, would it? Of course your team has already proven themselves to me, so little time together and already the four of you show great promise. What I will do is provide some incentives for you and your friends to come to me. Not that you don’t have enough, of course. This way you’ll all earn some extra XP so when we meet, and be in top form. Right this way, please, as if you had any choice in the matter.

The chair pushes back and your point of view follows the invisible

figure down a set of stairs to what looks like a small prison, and a magic circle appears inside one of them. A fairy appears, startled, and you catch just a glimpse before the door is slammed shut. There's no mistake, it's your mother. Three other cells are thus filled, and then the ice spell is cast as you watch, horrified, as the four people that have been brought here are frozen. More spells are then cast, and one by one they vanish. Your point of view goes upstairs again.

Were you watching, sweet Rose? I hope you were. Go outside, away from the protective magics of the building. Once there I'll send you a list of who I just took, and their current locations. Of course you recognized one, yes? So I'm sure you can guess the others, but just to be safe I'll give you the specifics. You each have one person to rescue, and each person is of course guarded. Beat the guardian and you'll get a piece of my location. Is this not a fine experiment? Put the pieces together and come to me. If you can beat me and my honor guard, fine. I will pay for what you perceive to be crimes. But if I win, you get to play your final part in my experiment. A great honor, I assure you. I've tested many people, but you and your friends seem to be particularly strong PCs. I hope to learn a lot from you. Go on now, off you go. I hope to see you soon, Rose!

You watch for a moment more, but the figure just goes back to work, looking at data on charts and on the computer that you can't make heads or tails of. You break off the spell in disgust.

"What did you see?" everyone asks as you open your eyes again.

"We've got trouble. Is there some kind of protective magic around the buildings?" you ask.

"Sure," says Clayton, who is into that kind of stuff. "So wizards don't teleport bombs in and such. But stuff can teleport out, so wizards can leave. Why?"

"Come with me, we may have to hurry."

Everyone is looking at you confused, but they don't argue, and follow you to the door.

"Wait here. If I get taken, well, I don't think I will be though." The others wait at the door to the outside and you flutter out nervously. You don't have to wait long, as a sheet of paper appears nearby and the others rush out to grab it. You look it over as well, and your suspicions were correct. It was your mother the figure Telesummoned, just as it was Clayton's father, Jaden's mother and Jake's little brother.

"What exactly happened when you spied on O.I.F.?" Clayton asks,

obviously trying to hold his temper in check.

“They somehow knew I was there looking,” you explain, “and Telesummoned these four people as I watched. They were then frozen in ice and Teleported away. The person was typing to me, and said each person would have a guardian. If we each beat that guardian we would get the person they took back. Plus a piece of the location we would ultimately find them. I think they’re studying us, or something, they kept going on about “the experiment” and how we should be grateful to be chosen to be a part of it.”

“Forget that, I just want to get my dad back!”

“Let’s not rush into anything,” says Jake, putting a hand on Clayton’s metal shoulder. “That’s just what this person wants us to do. Think it over. Naturally we go rushing off to save our relatives, each one of us going after their own.”

“So?”

“So, that’s what this person is expecting. The guardian will be someone that can neutralize us, right? Like the person guarding my father will be expecting an ESPer, and may be an ESPer themselves. But if you go rescue my father you’ll be using bullets, not Telekinesis, and they won’t know what to do.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” says Jaden, “if we can all trust each other to rescue somebody else’s family member.”

“It’s a good idea, let’s do it,” says Clayton. “Rose, you’re wiped out, right? Why don’t you go with Jaden and she’ll rescue two people.”

You shake your head. “No way. We have to do this all at once, or whoever this is will get wise to it and switch things around. We can’t give them the chance. I’ll go get someone to cast Energy Gift on me, and take some of their energy until I’m full again. I’m more concerned about who goes where.”

“Well, if what Jake said is true, you’ll probably have a wizard guarding your mom,” says Clayton.

“You’re the most resistant to magic,” you say back. “Would you go and rescue her?”

“I will treat her as if she were my own mother.”

“Thanks Clayton.”

“Who wants to take mine, which is probably a cyborg?”

Jaden smiles. “I’ve got that, I want to try out my new toys anyway.”

“You got it. That means either you go up against an ESPer, Jake, or

you do, Rose. How do you want to play it?"

You look over at Jake. "I'd pit my magic against ESP any day of the week, no offense," you say to him.

"None taken," he says with a shrug. "Magic is pretty amazing, and way stronger than anything I can do. That leaves me with a martial artist, if this is even the right thing to do at all. For all we know, even this has been anticipated, and the person guarding each captive is going to surprise us."

"I don't know," says Clayton, "we picked our opponent almost at random. Even O.I.F. can't anticipate the future that well!"

"I hope you're right," says Jaden. "Let's go end this, once and for all."

You can't help agreeing.

Chapter 16.1

Big Rescue

You are Jake, having been sent to a nearby NPC-PS teleport point, and a car is waiting for you.

You've been driving for about two hours now, the GPS system in the NPC-PS car beckoning you ever closer to the location where Jaden's mother is being held. You've grown weary of corn. Endless fields of corn, who needs all this corn anyway? How much corn can one person eat?

You seem to have forgotten the insanely powerful corn lobby, that drives fuel manufacturers to add their nasty, awful, gunky ethanol, a corn derivative, to light, sweet, pure gasoline. The Narrator will save the exercise of deciding whether this is good or bad up to the Observer. He, of course, espouses no opinion one way or the other here.

Finally the GPS counts down to zero miles and you pull into a driveway that winds its way up to a farmhouse that seems abandoned. Animals like chickens are running about, and you see a couple of horses in a fenced off area, but no people. You turn the car off and wait, wondering if something is going to attack you or not. Apart from the chickens coming back, there's no movement around the car, or in the house that you can see. Your Premonition isn't sounding warning bells, so you figure you might as well take a quick look around the premises before stepping out physically. You relax, close your eyes, and make a Bilocation check, getting a seventeen. You venture out of the car in your ghostly state, having pushed your senses beyond your body. Taking a second to pause you look around again, making sure nothing springs out now that your body is helpless. You hate to do this without backup, if your body is moved while you're away, that's it for you. It really can't be helped. You turn and speed off, checking the barn first.

At first glance it seems perfectly ordinary. There are some cows in here, and the back is opened up to a field with a fence around it, so they can come and go as they please. You also see some pigs over in a corner, and of course the horses out by the side. You take a second glance, then a longer look, and yes, it still seems perfectly ordinary. You really hope

you have the right place. It would be very embarrassing to show back up at headquarters saying “oh, it was 1923 Noplace lane? I thought it was 1293 Noplace lane, how silly of me!”

Still, there should be people here, where are they? The animals have food and water, so work is being done here. Strange.

You speed into the house, and the story is the same. Empty but lived in. Okay, this is starting to creep you out, has O.I.F. done something to the people here? Everything looks put away, you don't seem to see food out or dropped books indicating something happened while they were unaware. You suppose they could have packed up normally and departed just recently. There are several bedrooms, none of them look like kid's rooms, but all are in various states of cleanliness. Someone is living here, or at least was. You might have to come in here and use Postcognition on things to see what happened, homing in on the last activity and proceeding from there. You head out to your body and settle back in, blinking against the fading daylight as you carefully open the car door and step out.

You glance around, noting that nothing has changed. A chicken does come over to you and looks hopefully up at you.

“I don't have anything for you,” you say, knowing that to tease a chicken may invite disaster. At least, that's what certain video games have taught you. You step around the chicken and head to the house, gravel from the path crunching under your feet. You decide that, as empty as the house looked, it would be impolite not to at least knock on the door before *phasing* your way through it. You raise your fist to knock.

Between the first and second knocks there's a piercing shriek and something lunges at you through the door! You jump back and a hideous looking ghost... thing emerges, shrieks again, and flies off, making you jump out of the way. Belatedly, you realize your Premonition wasn't warning you, so it was probably an Illusion. You look again, and the door is now open, and a ghostly figure is standing there. It looks like a farmer, or more properly the ghost of a farmer, hovering a few inches off the floor. You are compelled to make a REASON check, getting an eleven. Unfortunately whoever created this got a fifteen, so you're not sure if it's real or not.

“Jaden, you've come!” the figure says. “Quickly, you have to hurry, you can still save my family, and your mother!” He beckons you inside. “Hurry. Hurry!”

Okay, this thing just called you Jaden, and last time you checked

you were Jake, but... yup, still Jake. Looks like the old switch-a-roo plan worked. Still, you did fail your REASON check, so that aside, you aren't sure if this is a real ghost or not. *May as well see what I can see.* You head toward the open door-

And bang your face on the still closed, very solid, covered by Illusion, front door that still bars your way into the house. You hear mocking laughter, and the image of the inside of the house fades as you stagger back, holding your nose.

You do a quick Healing Acceleration on yourself, spending a little energy and blinking water out of your eyes. *Stupid wizards. Not you Rose,* you think to yourself.

"Sorry about that," says a voice behind you, and you whirl around to see a young boy standing there. You make another REASON check, but your five REASON works against you yet again. You fail by two, so you aren't sure if this is an Illusion or not. "The bad person came and did things to us. You'll find us in the basement, which is around the back of the house and through the wooden doors."

The figure vanishes, and you could facepalm. Of course you didn't check for a basement in your Bilocation form because you didn't see any stairs leading down. Not on the inside the house, anyway. Of course there might be some outside in an old building like this! Stupid, stupid, stupid. Of course you haven't visited a lot of old farmhouses either, but still.

You make your way carefully around the house, and see the wooden doors the ghost(?) Illusion(?) the whatever told you about, and take a long look at them. They are locked with a simple padlock, which you poke with a stick to make sure *it* isn't an Illusion. It seems solid enough, so you look it over and decide the best way to get rid of it. You touch the top part and use Cryokinesis to slow molecular motion in the metal, making it colder and more brittle. You get a twelve on your check and make the TR 4 metal TR 2. Then you step back and use Rend, spending five energy for a total of-

One damage.

Son of a... Monkey. Spank. Hate. Kill. Stupid lock! You then spend two energy at a time, getting a three, a four, and a three again on damage, rolling HDL[2] per attack and taking the lock out. It's a little trick you figured out in conjunction with your Energy Boost skill, which allows you to roll a check after spending energy. As you spent only two, and for every five you roll on the Energy Boost check you get one back, you only spent one per attempt, rather than two, in the end. You roll at least a five

per attempt, given your skill and stat, so low energy things like this don't bother you too much. Should have done that in the first place, rather than trying to show off by busting the lock in one action. Who's around here to see you? Idiot. *Of course the Observer might be, you think, if you believe in that sort of thing.* You don't have to impress them, you aren't being graded on style. In any case, you're down to 47 energy, and can now proceed.

You creak open the doors and peer down into the darkness, seeing nothing but a drop down into an underground passage. Shouldn't there be stairs here? Well, maybe O.I.F. took them out, not that a drop like this would give Jaden any pause. You start to swing your legs over when your Premonition gives you a tingle and you hesitate, getting out your flashlight and playing it over the floor. You make a REASON check, this time succeeding by one, so you realize there is something fishy about this passage. You can't be sure of what. Either there's a trap here covered by Illusion, or a long drop covered by an Illusionary floor. You look around for something to drop until you realize, hey, you have a stick in your hand still! You drop the stick, and it goes clattering to the floor.

Mostly.

You see it sticking up at an angle and decide there may be tiny spikes on the floor here. You walk out to the barn, find a piece of wood that's nice and flat, but not too thin, and drop it down into the hole. Dropping down on top of it, you feel the wood flex as it's held up by the points of the trap, and hop off to investigate. You feel around, and come to realize there are small spikes here on the floor, obviously not there to kill, but rather to maim, and quite painfully too. You'll have to be on your guard for more Illusion magic.

You walk a ways down the passage and realize this is not a normal basement. It's more like an underground tunnel, distention unknown. It seems to slope downwards a little bit, and you haven't gone too far when you feel a force pushing you back, and you can't go any further down the hallway. You put your hand out, and there doesn't seem to be any sort of barrier here that you can feel. At the same time, you can go no further. You pick up a chunk of dirt off the ground and toss it through, and it splatters down the hall a ways, meaning it's more magic. Something that will keep living things out but not objects. You look around but can't seem to see any indication of where it's coming from, so you back off and try jumping through the area. No luck. You don't really know anything about magic, but you could try calling NPC-PS and asking for

advice. You reluctantly get out your cell phone and see what kind of signal you can get down here.

None.

Super. You head back to the opening and heave yourself out of the pit, walking a ways away, but still, nothing. You belatedly realize that one, you are out in the country, so why would there be a cell signal here? And two, Clayton ran into the same issue when he was kidnapped, so obviously there may be a jamming field around this house. You sigh and wonder if you should head back down the road, see if you can get a signal elsewhere. The fact is you really do need to hurry in case O.I.F. realizes what's going on and changes the game on you again.

You head back down and meet the force again, and wonder if you could just wait it out. Magic doesn't last forever, that much you know, so it's possible. You scuff at the area and think it over. Finally it dawns on you that maybe this is some kind of Earth spell that keeps creatures out? (It isn't) Maybe if you were "flying" it wouldn't function, being tied to the Earth! So you try to levitate yourself down the passageway with Telekinesis, getting a 12 to lift yourself over the area. That's enough to lift- twenty-five pounds or so?

You weigh more than twenty five pounds, so you try again.

You succeed this time, and awkwardly float your way down the passage, past the area you couldn't seem to get over before. *ESPer powers for the win*, you suppose. Moving further down the passageway you come to a room off to the side, and cautiously look into it. Looks like a storeroom. There are some rusty shelves along the walls, and a table piled with junk. Some shovels and other tools sit in a rack to the right, and jars of unknown content sit on the shelves to the left. None of it looks particularly useful, and you turn to continue looking around down here. That's when your Premonition goes off again, a little too late in this case. You make a dodge back down the hallway but you get a six, your minimum. The chains and rope that had been sitting on the table are now wound around you tight. Your momentum causes you to topple over.

This is certainly undignified, you think. You wiggle around, but you don't have an Escaping skill, so this almost seems to make things worse. What you do have are ESPer powers, and while it might take a little finesse, you can see a way of getting yourself out of this. Of course, with your hands bound like this it might be tricky because you need to gesture in order to use your powers. Still, you have a plan.

Your plan is to push yourself upright with Telekinesis, then use

Phase to get the bonds off by just passing through them. Here goes!

You roll a sixteen, taking your minus four penalty into account for your Somatic Powers weakness, and easily give yourself a burst of motion. Then, before you topple over again, you use Phase, putting energy into RESolve because your penalty for this is equal to your skill rating! The fates smile on you, getting another 16, and the chains and ropes fly off of you as you again tumble to the ground. Brushing yourself off you warily watch them for any further sign of animation, but there is none. Carefully stepping over them you retrieve your fallen flashlight, and continue down the passageway.

Suddenly, it seems your light goes out, and you are plunged into darkness. You immediately stop moving and listen, also making an ESP check. An eleven this time, and you sense nothing amiss. Your Premonition is also quiet, meaning you probably aren't in danger, physically, but you might trigger something stumbling along in the dark. You reach out for the cave wall, and carefully start moving forward again, keeping your ESP going as you move forward. Just as well, it warns you that there's a tripwire up ahead, and you carefully step over it to prevent the total collapse of the tunnel you're in. You also sense you're nearing the end of this leg of your journey, there's a large open area up ahead. Passing over the tripwire, you find you can see again, and proceed.

You now come to the mouth of what looks like an underground cave, or at least something that's been hollowed out. Flattening yourself against the wall you click off the flashlight. You're pretty sure you caught a glimpse of what looked like ice in the center, probably the frozen form of Jaden's mother. You again listen, and make an ESP check, getting another eleven because that's how these things go. Still, it's enough to tell there are four objects in the room in front of you. If your senses are right, three of those objects are *coffins!*

You inch your way forward, dreading what you're no doubt going to find in these coffins. As you do there's a funny tingling in your body. You are compelled to make a RESolve check against a sixteen difficulty, which you do. Or so you think, given your seventeen. Sadly, the Narrator got card 13 which means he spends the 2 XP that card gives him, making his new check an 18. This makes you fail, and the tingle passes.

That was odd, you think. Still, it must not have been dangerous as your Premonition didn't warn you, right?

As you enter the cavern, lights come on, illuminating the objects within and showing you what the last spell you didn't fight off did. It

Shrank you, and you are now about a quarter of the size you used to be. How lucky for you, to see things from a whole new perspective! Like the three pale, gaunt figures that are rising out of the coffins with murder in their eyes. And by that the Narrator means they look ready to murder something, not that liquid death is streaming out of their eyes like salty tears. They're wearing fancy clothes with red capes, and your Premonition is screaming danger at you.

This is not good. Can you even take one of these guys in an unfair fight? You don't think so... where did O.I.F. find three of them, and get them to do this, anyway?

"That can't be her?" the one on the left says. "That's a bleeding boy, isn't it?"

"I think it just might be," says the one in the middle. "Aw, the invisible one's not going to be happy about that, are they?"

"What are you doing down here boy?" asks the one on the right. "This isn't any place you should be, you know?"

Wait, this might be okay after all!

"I, I don't know Sir, please, where am I?" you say, getting a twelve on your Acting check, the maximum you can roll. Luck be a Lady... Good thing you took that acting class in High School, even if it was to get closer to that cute- focus Jake.

All three don't seem very INSightful, and make a check to see through your spot performance, but don't even get close. They seem to believe you.

"This is a farm in the middle of nowhere, kid. Did you get lost?" says the middle one.

You take a step back as though terrified. "Are you all, va-va- vampires?"

"Sort of. What's your name anyway?"

"Joe!" you say, the only thing you can come up with on short notice like this. *Note to self, have better cover story next time.*

"Come on," says the right one. "Let's get you up to the house and call your parents, okay? It should be dark enough out by now, right?" He looks at a watch. Since when do vampires wear watches, anyway? "They're probably worried sick. It's corn for miles around here, when did you get lost, anyway?"

"I just found myself here, please don't hurt me, I'll just leave, I promise."

"Wait a second, how did he get by all the traps?" asks the one on

the left. All three of them are walking towards you now, and glancing over you see the frozen block of ice holding Jaden's mother.

You need to stall for time.

"What's that?" you ask, pointing.

"What?" He seems to be having trouble knowing who to answer first, just as you intended. "Oh, don't worry about that, it doesn't have anything to do with you."

"Wait, back up, how did you get by the traps?"

"Traps, sir? I don't know what you're talking about. Can I go now, you can go back to sleep or whatever?"

"I think we better hold on to you until we know exactly what's going on," says the left one, reaching for you.

"Don't touch me!" you shout, flinging your hands out to "shove" the man. In reality you're using Telekinesis to knock him back. You get a sixteen, he gets a nineteen to resist, probably having spent energy on his STStrength check. In your favor he takes a penalty, for not being able to grab anything nearby, which equals your skill of eight. You win, spending an energy and flinging him back across the length of the cave, where he smashes into the wall and takes damage. He flops to the ground, and the other two stare at you with a shocked expression for a second. The center one yells "Grab him!" and everyone rolls initiative.

Both vampires reach for you so you throw up a Barrier, crossing your arms in front of you to activate the power. You get a thirteen, they get a nine and a twelve, so their arms go skittering off the invisible wall of force you've created around yourself. They stumble a little, not expecting to be balked in this way. Following up with a little wave you activate your Masking skill. This automatically drops the Barrier, even though most other ESPer skills you can use simultaneously. You get a twenty-one, way more than they can ever hope to roll on a perception check (you hope) and are gratified to see them looking around for you. "Crap, did he Teleport?" asks the middle one.

You think about attacking one of them with Combust. If they really are vampires (and they didn't really move fast enough to be, so you're still not sure) they would take extra damage. However, you have to ask yourself if that would be the honorable thing to do, and it probably wouldn't. Of course, fighting three against one certainly isn't honorable on their part, but you're better than them, right? Still, you aren't sure *how* you're actually going to get out of this mess, as you haven't mastered Teleporting yet. Moving that huge block of ice with Telekinesis would

make them notice you for sure. Luckily your Honorable weakness is balanced with your Thoughtful background, so you come up with a plan almost immediately. You carefully make your way across the cavern, opposite the three vampires and watch them swinging around trying to connect with you. The two are still pretty close together, and the third has gotten up and is looking around too. You take a deep breath and hope this is going to work!

You grab one of the vampires that's close to the other and fling him with Telekinesis into the other one, knocking them both over. Vampire 3 (as you now call him) runs at you, claws extended, but doesn't quite reach you before you get to act again. You decide to set his hair on fire, and make a called shot with Combust, snapping your fingers and concentrating on making that shiny white hair become fire. You get a fifteen, and the vampire's passive dodge is a 9, plus the 3 for called shot. Not enough to avoid the attack, so he takes fifty percent more damage to the head. That's a total of 6, and his hair catches on fire. He makes his RESolve check to not freak out, but knows he is going to have to put that out rather quickly or suffer rather painfully for quite a while. He lunges for the ice block and starts rubbing his head on it, hoping to smother the flames. You figure he'll be out of it for a little while and turn your attention to the other two, who are looking like they want the other to attack first. The one's left side is all beat up where he smashed into the other, and Vampire 2 (as you now call him) is keeping his weight off his right side and is holding his body. It's odd, why don't they just go into mist form or invisible? Something isn't right here.

"Truce!" Vampire 1 (you know the drill) calls to you, hopping on one leg to grab onto Vampire 2 to help hold him up.

"Truce?" you sneer. "With a vampire? You just want a breather so you'll Regenerate and all attack me at once again!"

"We saw how well that worked," says Vampire 2, rolling his eyes.

"Fine," you say, willing to give them a small chance to prove themselves. You can't just attack them now that they've called for a truce. That wouldn't be honorable, and if they are sincere, you'll have to see what they have to say. You ready your fingers to snap in case they try anything, and point to the far end of the cavern. "Sit down over there, backs to the wall."

"Can you put out our friend?" he asks, as vampire 3 continues thrashing around, grinding his head into the ice block.

"Oh, sorry, I don't know Pyrokinesis, fire control, just Combust,

setting things on fire.”

“That figures,” says vampire 1 as they both hobble over to where you pointed and sit down. You watch awhile as vampire 3 puts himself out, then glares at you with his charred and burnt up face. *EWW*.

“Your clothes will be next,” you say, showing him your fingers.

“Fine, fine,” he says, going over to sit with the others. He’s walking slowly, and you can see he is Regenerating, but not as fast as you might expect.

“So what’s your deal?” you ask.

“We’re cursed, in a way, sort of pseudo vampires,” says vamp 2.

“*Sudo* vampires?” you ask, confused. *What do UNIX commands have to do with being vampires?*

“We’re faux vampires,” says vampire 1.

“You might still be my foes,” you say, not comprehending.

“We aren’t real vampires!” shouts vampire 3, annoyed.

“Why didn’t you say so? What are you then?”

“Look,” says number 2, “some invisible person came to us like fifty years ago, right? Said they could make us immortal, and all we had to do was guard whatever she put down here. They gave us a heads up recently that an ice block was coming down here and to keep it cold. We also were given an imbued object to make more ice so we could do that. Said a girl was coming and we should capture her without fail, or they would be very, very cross with us. Anyway, all those years ago that sounded pretty good, so she made us immortal. Then cursed us to live like vampires until they no longer needed us, or died. I guess they haven’t died yet, so he we all still are. We expected a martial artist, not someone that could set us on fire from across the room, so it’s kind of a stalemate. We’ll Regenerate, but not as fast as a real vampire would. And sun burns us, but we can eat regular food still. So it’s a trade off, but we like living here and don’t want to die, but we don’t want to get killed by that invisible person either. So I don’t know what to do- you’re not the person we’re supposed to catch, but I’m guessing you want to take the ice block out of here, right?”

“That’s right. Four people were stolen by that invisible person and we figured we would mess them up by going after a person not related to us. We figured the traps and challenges would be geared towards the person, and it seemed we were right. Jaden, that’s the girl you’re talking about, would have had a very hard time getting through those traps to get down here.”

“Wait a minute,” says fake vampire 1, “you’re with NPC-PS, aren’t you? That’s how you messed us up so good.”

“That’s right, but I still have a lot of skills to learn and improve, as an ESPer.”

“Well, if we cross you, you’ll just set us on fire again,” says f.v. 3, now fully recovered by the looks of it. He’s trying to get his newly grown hair back in place. “Have you ever been set on fire? It’s not pleasant.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“An ESPer can generate fire, but he’s never experienced that fire for himself. Does that seem fair to you?”

You can’t place where you’ve heard that before-

“We’ll just be going now,” says f.v. 1, getting up. “Go ahead and melt the ice, we obviously can’t stop you like that invisible person said. If they are angry at us for letting you go, well, it’s been a good fifty years for us, hasn’t it fellows?”

“Yup.”

“Sure has.”

“Great job beating us. If we were real vampires, you should have run, just for future reference.”

“I know. You didn’t move quite right or sound quite right, not that I’ve met any to compare with, of course. Just something seemed off about you. Maybe my ESP told me, I don’t know.”

“Good luck. Hope you survive the invisible one coming after you, once they realize what you’ve done by switching rescuers.”

They file out, and you can’t help but think they’re pretty decent people, all told. They did what they were told in exchange for becoming somewhat like vampires without all the negatives, and knew when they were outmatched. You wait a moment, then head out yourself and grab the stick and the piece of wood. Dragging them, along with some cloth you found in the side room, back to the ice block. You set everything on fire, then use Combust to gently unfreeze the figure within. This nearly drains your energy, but warms them up enough to stop shivering and figure out what’s going on. You lead Jaden’s mom back out and to the car, where she is happy to drive you back to the NPC-PS building you came from while you nap. *It’s nice to see some action, you think, but it does tend to tire me out when I do.*

When you arrive back at the base you suggest she stay inside, and bring the rest of her family inside too. Nothing stops O.I.F. from yanking them out again except magic, and not knowing exactly where they are.

You don't know much about magic, but you do know the spell O.I.F. keeps using (you looked it up) requires them to know at least roughly where someone is. Staying out of sight until this whole thing is over is a plan she gets behind.

Lastly you ask her if she has anything for you, but claims she doesn't. You insist she check her pockets though, and she finds a storage device in her pocket she didn't know she had. You figure that must be what you're looking for. You hand it in to be checked for viruses and such before being connected to anything, and go to meet the others to see how they did.

Chapter 16.2

Big Rescue

You are Clayton, heading to the address given to you where Rose's mother is being held.

“This can't be right,” you say to Scindo, your hacking agent, as you drive down a lonely desert road. “How can it be in the middle of nowhere like this?”

“I admit to being unsure,” says the car speakers, muting the radio. You're currently plugged into the car, giving Scindo a little room to breathe. Not that he does, being software and all. Still, he's someone to bounce ideas off of, even if his experience is limited mostly to hacking stuff. You could talk to him just in your head, but that seems a little too much like talking to yourself. Not that anyone is here to hear or not hear his replies. Still, you have the tech, you're going to use it, darn it!

“Of course, from another point of view it's perfect. You can probably see people coming for miles. If I wanted to hide someone, buried in the middle of an open field would be a place I would consider.”

“That must be it,” Scindo replies. He pauses. “I am compelled to call your attention to the car's GPS system, which we have just lost.”

You glance over, and sure enough, you're getting no bars of signal and the color scheme on the display has changed, meaning it can't find satellites anymore. You glance in the rear view mirror, making sure no one is behind you (there isn't) and pull the car off to the side of the road. You query your own personal GPS system that was implanted in your head, and it too is getting a big, fuzzy nothingness.

“That's just great!” you exclaim.

“I am unsure how losing the GPS signal can be interpreted as a positive development.”

“That was sarcasm, you... stupid...” You are not going to get angry with your hacking program.

“Ah yes, I must remember to keep my sarcasm detector subroutine active.”

“Was that- never mind.” You unplug, step out of the car and climb on top of it, scanning the horizon around your position.

There is something there, all right, you note to yourself. That's

got to be the place. You don't dare approach any closer with the car, but there's also no cover to speak of between here and there. Hey, no problem, right? You can take anybody who's there, because you're the best at what you do! At least that's what your Overconfident weakness is telling you. You have prepared well in any case, and jump off the car, walking around to the trunk while checking your inventory. You have both your guns and they are both loaded with rubber rounds at the moment. Rose insisted on this before you left, and you finally gave in to stop her whining. You have a clip loaded with *real* ammo of course, and whatever clip you have in will get reloaded with the spell on the gun, so that's no problem. You have a small barrel of each kind sitting in your room, no worries about counting shots on this little adventure! Of course, shooting even once would be the worst possible thing, drawing immediate attention to your position. Silencer on the gun or not. Even worse would be using the stun grenades, but the multiple sets of handcuffs will probably come in handy.

You click open the trunk. The bright, cheerful, global warming enriched sunlight merrily beams down upon you as you stare at the black pieces of plastic you are about to strap onto yourself. You grab the water jug and take a nice long pull of ice water, splashing a little on your face. It'll be the last for a while, you're afraid to say. That done, you start pulling out pieces of armor from a box labeled "Active Camo," joining them together clumsily. You've only practiced this a couple of times, but it's not like you're trying to do it in combat or anything. You start snapping it around yourself, making sure the fit is good, and soon you are totally enclosed in a sort of shell. You pull a mirror out and prop it up so you can see yourself.

You activate the electronics inside, and seem to vanish, light bending around your body or at least seeming to. It uses power like crazy, but you'll only need it for the final approach, you hope. You check to make sure it's all working and power it down, then unplug the recharge socket from the battery. Ugh, you're going to die in this thing, it's getting hot already. Hopefully you won't have to wear it long. With what this thing costs (you had to sign double the usual amount of paperwork to take it out to the field) you would think they could put in a small cooling unit. You suppose every iota of power must go to the Camo part of the 'Active Camo system', so you reluctantly resolve to get used to it. Strapping on a sweatbox to rescue a fairy on ice. That seems about right for this little adventure.

You lock up the car and fix the magnetic directional onto the building you saw. They may be able to block GPS but they can't block the Earth's magnetic field! The gloves on the armor are too fat to use your guns with, so totally unarmed, you head in the direction the compass points. As you get close you activate the system and vanish again, creeping up to what looks like a fence with wire on the top. You notice guards patrolling the area inside. You go still, and the energy drain stabilizes at about 40%, giving you twenty minutes or so of motionless hiding in plain sight.

"The heck?" you say, moving your eyes back and forth.

"It seems rather like a military installation, if I may say so Sir," says Scindo in your head. And it does, as the place is surrounded by a high fence, with razor wire sticking out the top towards the outside. A couple of guards are milling about, looking bored, which will change real fast if someone spots you. This stuff isn't bulletproof, after all. Beyond all that is a nondescript building, the back of which you seem to have stumbled upon because there's only one door. Probably the main gate and larger doors are on the other side, along with the road and ten million different kinds of scanning or sensing devices.

"Is that even possible?"

"I can only offer you the reality of what you are seeing, which may not be very helpful. I can assure you this does not seem to be an Illusion of any kind."

"No it isn't."

"Helpful, or an Illusion?"

"Neither."

"Thank you for clarifying. Therefore, if it is not a military installation it is a very good facsimile of one."

"Which is disturbing either way. O.I.F. either has contacts in the military, the resources to build and staff a place like this, or has somehow hidden Rose's mother inside without anyone knowing."

"If the last option, the front door might be the best approach."

"We can't risk it. Our opponent has always seemed very well prepared, I wouldn't put it past them to somehow control this place."

"Then you must find a way in without being noticed, sir."

"Any ideas?"

"I regret that I am a hacking AI, not an infiltration AI. I can only break into things in the digital world."

"I do see a door right there, but like the doors to our building they

probably need an eye scan, a card swipe and a passcode. You'd have to hack all three things at once to get in."

"Depending on the amount of money thrown at securing this location, perhaps even more stringent methods of keeping people out are employed."

"Wish I had cyber legs right now that could just jump that fence."

"I would think you would rather wish to have already succeeded in your mission and be on your way back, if I understand the principal of wishing correctly, sir."

"Very funny."

"Thank you, I have been- oh, that was more sarcasm, wasn't it?"

You decide not to answer.

Good move.

You wait a moment until the one guard is out of sight, then shimmy up the fence as quietly as possible in your clunky optical suit. Your next move is to grab the spar that holds the wire up there. You freeze and silently repeat "go away" as someone cranes their neck around the corner, looking to see if something is going on. They look around, but shake their head, muttering about hearing things. *Yeah, that's an NPC guard all right.* You wait a few more seconds before hoisting yourself up, cyber arms straining, then swinging yourself over the wire and onto the other side. Of course the camo suit gets a bit scratched up, but you can't worry about that now. Dropping quietly to the other side and staying low, you make your way to the door.

"Well done sir."

"Thanks."

You're now down to 25% power, and again go motionless, conserving energy. You chuckle, why don't they make these things solar powered or something?

You wait until the guard passes again and make an unarmed attack, grabbing him and slamming him up against the door, dazing him.

"Open the door," you say, sticking your finger in his back and hoping, in his panic, that he will believe it's a gun. *Who needs magic to create Illusions?* You cover his mouth with your glove, and realize just how wrongly this situation could go. This man is just an NPC though, and not feeling particularly brave, or interested in fighting an invisible man, and nods his head.

You see he has a key card on a pull string attached to his belt, so you grab it and shove it into the slot. The light on the unit goes from red

to green, so at least that much is going according to “plan.” You put his face up to the iris reader, which also goes green.

“Type,” you say as the keyboard attached to the card reader lights up. “And the real code, not the one that sets off the silent alarm, I already know that one.”

“Oh, good bluff sir,” says Scindo. “And good thinking. It does stand to reason they would employ something similar at this facility, doesn’t it?”

You watch as he punches in the code, making the third light go green, and the door unlocks. It’s probably triggered a “door open” message someplace, but you hustle him inside so hopefully no one checked fast enough. Maybe this guy goes inside to use the bathroom or whatever on occasion, so it won’t be remarked upon?

You’re now in a back hallway, which runs only a few feet in front of you before branching off left and right, and which is clear. First order of business? Ditch this guy.

“Now listen to me,” you say softly, knowing your voice will be further muffled by the armor. “I’m here to get someone out. A fairy, frozen in a block of ice. I don’t care about your military secrets or why this base is in the middle of nowhere. I am going to go in, find that fairy, and leave again. You getting me?”

The man nods.

“Good. I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. I’m going to lock you up so you don’t cause trouble. Which way do I go to do that?”

He jerks his head left, so you push him forward and turn around so you can peer around the corner. Coast is clear, so you left and look in the first door. Seems to be a meeting room, there’s a table and chairs in there. The next door is locked, but the next one, at the end of the hallway isn’t. It’s a storeroom. You push the guy in there and watch your power drain to 10%. You deactivate the camo and get some handcuffs out of your inventory with your right hand, your left still holding the guy’s mouth. You snap the handcuff on his right hand and push him down, then attach it to his left ankle.

“Hush now, quiet now, you remember what I said, right?” you ask.

The man nods again.

You scan the room, and you see some wide tape on a shelf. This is good luck for you, so you take your hand away and grab it. You work off your one glove so you can get some tape off, and plaster his mouth

closed with it. Now that you look at this guy, he seems about your age, which is weird. “What-” you start to ask, then change your mind. You handcuff his left arm to his right ankle and start taking off your camo gear. It would be nice to recharge it, and you do find a power plug in this room and hook it in, but you don’t have time to wait. It’ll just slow you down now that you’re inside, so you take the whole thing off.

“All right,” you say, grabbing a rope and tying the crossed handcuffs to the nearby shelf. “I’m leaving you here and getting the fairy, so don’t make trouble.”

He seems to understand the situation so you check your guns. One clip of real ammo in your left hand, one clip of replenishing rubber ammo in your right. *Let’s do this thing.*

You grab the guy’s ID as an afterthought. It doesn’t look like you, of course, but it might cause someone to hesitate long enough for you to act if you get caught. You crack the door open and look down the hall, deciding not to lock it because you might want to avoid paying for this camo equipment if you can help it, so you plan to come back. No one is there, so you head out, shut the door softly behind you, and head to the meeting room. That door do you close and lock behind you, hopefully giving you a few moments of privacy. You look around the walls, and yes, there’s a port for network access, so you slip your cable into it and tell Scindo to poke around and report back.

You wait a few minutes and it does, saying that “I nearly got caught the first check I made, a thirteen, so I backed off and let things calm down, then tried again. I got a 23 on my next attempt, so I’m in the system now. Would you believe this is a training facility?”

“Yes I would, it explains why there isn’t more activity in here, and how young that guy I took out looked.”

“I must tell you, there is no record of a fairy being brought here, or of anything frozen in ice, really. There is only one floor, and the scheduled drill currently being enacted should allow us relatively unmolested access to the entire complex. That isn’t to say we have the place totally to ourselves, you’ll want to erase the camera footage of you sneaking around. I must caution you there are several people left inside the building. None are listed as PCs in their personnel files. I must conclude the camera operator was not present or was inattentive, there are cameras in all the hallways which must have recorded you.”

“So no real fighters? That’s one bit of good news. But if she hasn’t been brought here, what’s the point of staying?”

“She was not officially brought here, that does not mean she won’t be found here unofficially.”

“I guess you’re right, we’ll just have to look around. Still, this place is a hot box, they would need some serious cooling to keep that fairy on ice. Or magic, I guess.”

“I have no information.”

“Okay, let’s go.”

You unplug and creep down the hall again to the right, passing a room full of active equipment. Probably some kind of communications room by the look of it. The next room interests you greatly, it seems to be the camera room! The operator sitting in front of the monitors seems more interested in his book than in watching the cameras. You’ll have to control this room if you want to purge those recordings, and figure the best way would be to shoot the guy in the head with a rubber bullet, knocking him out. You can almost hear Scindo saying the “best” way would be for you to ask nicely, and for him to comply perfectly and give you Rose’s mom and send you on your way with a cookie. But knocking him out is a close second. You edge your gun into the room, and take careful aim, noting that there doesn’t seem to be anyone that close to you if those monitors are to be believed.

Man, this guy is clueless. You can plainly see yourself aiming at this guy in the monitor in the lower right. So if he just looked up, he would see it too. Anyway, you do a called shot to the head, and to increase damage, because you want him taken out before he can raise any kind of alarm. You didn’t want to shoot and attract attention to yourself in here, but charging in there would probably be noisier? Still, these bullets *do* use less gunpowder, and you do have a silencer attached, so let’s hope...

You fire, getting a seventeen to hit, which he can’t possibly negate with a CONstitution check, but it doesn’t matter because you get a ten on your damage roll anyway, which knocks him out regardless.

He slumps over.

You slither your way into the room, around the door frame and check the monitors. You don’t know it, but the Narrator rolls your LUCk, and you get a 12. This is enough to make sure no-one heard you for later plot reasons, so you tensely watch the monitors for signs of movement. You breathe a sigh of relief when it seems things go on as normal in the base.

You plug into the jack here and with Scindo’s help hack the system

to stop recording for the time being, and erase your signs of recent passage from the computer's memory. You also find and retrieve your bullet, wouldn't do to leave that lying around, now would it? Then you slump this chump over his chair onto the monitors, making it look to the casual observer like he just fell asleep. Hopefully anyone walking by will just shake their heads and think "he's gonna get in so much trouble" rather than stopping in to "wake" him. You hope.

Time to press on.

Directly across from that is the medical room. There's a bed, racks of medical looking stuff, and a curtain. You head in, but there's no one here, so that's one less room to worry about.

You head down the hallway further left and to your left is a small martial arts room across from an office, which are both empty. The next door to the right is another office, and across the hall is a much larger room with weights and other work out equipment. You suppose this is for PCs that want to pay the outrageous XP cost of raising stats. You think for a minute, looking at the equipment. You have a natural STrength of four, which is one higher because of your cyber arms, bringing it up to a five. To bring your natural STrength up to a five would cost you twenty XP, more than half of what you've earned since you entered NPC-PS and gone on all those adventures. You shake your head, only someone with a very low physical stat would even bother, right? You start to move past but hear a noise like someone set a weight down, and freeze. Is someone actually in there?

You sneak around the corner, watching for mirrors so you aren't spotted and yes, someone is in here working out, the fool. You can't get a good angle on him, the machine he's working on is in the way. Plus there's a mirror right there so you can't sneak on up him either.

You think for a moment and just decide to leave him be. He's probably not going anywhere for a while so you'll just have to hope he doesn't walk past the monitor room in the next few minutes. You ease your way back out and flatten yourself against the corner. Looks like this is the main hallway, there's the guard station beyond those doors, which thankfully is staffed by someone looking out, not in. There's a door to your left, which, keeping low you open and peer inside. Looks like another storeroom, great. You continue on and the next door is that flappy kind, and you see through the plastic portal it's the mess hall, and someone's having a snack in there.

You grimace, this person is going to be more of a problem, they'll

be up and about much sooner than muscle-head back there. It seems to be a woman, but that doesn't bother you. It's not like you have a soft spot Weakness or anything. You open the door a crack and slip your gun through, taking the time to aim and taking the same penalty as last time for greater damage. Your check compared to hers is phenomenal, and again you are pleased when this person slumps over into their food, knocked out. You slip into the room, again holding your breath and hoping no one heard that. There's no patter of running feet, so you make the woman a little more comfortable on the bench, whisper a hasty apology (you aren't stupid, you know she can't hear it) and look around. There seems to be a kitchen through the back, and a pantry to the right, so no help there.

Heading back to the main hallway you again keep low, and pass by a locked door with the same three factor security as the main door you came through, so it's probably where they keep the guns. You head further right to where you hear singing, of all things, and peak into the next door. Looks like a lounge. There're some couches, a big TV, and there's another woman standing in front of it, playing a video game by the looks of it. The words she's singing are appearing on the screen, and she's doing some dance moves that are mirroring the figures on the screen. Figures she would do this while most everyone was away, but you wonder why she's not out with the others doing whatever drill is going on now. But then, someone has to stay and guard the base, right?

Now you're torn again. If the singing abruptly cuts off, the guard in the vestibule area there, which is not that far away, might wonder what happened and come investigate. Still, their holding cells can't be off the lounge, right? You'll have to check back the other way- what the heck is that lady doing? Her singing isn't that bad, but she must have just rolled minimum on her Dancing check. She's started flopping around like a fish out of water. Like a dog on an ice rink. Like a teen wearing high heels the very first time.

You've got to get out of here before the similes get any worse.

You head back the other way, down the entrance hallway and past the training room. Yup, muscle man is still grunting away, more power to you and all that. *You're an NPC, man. Your STrength is never going to get above a five, no matter how many times you lift that circular metal donut.* Monitor room guy is snoozing, *just keep it up why don't you*, and you move past the hallway with the door you came in and continue down the other way.

You head all the way down and peek in on your buddy, he's still taped, hand cuffed and roped up, so no trouble there.

"Good job, keep hanging in there," you encourage him.

He gives you the *sarcastic person's middle finger* as best he can, and you feel there's no need to be rude about it.

Heading right down the only hallway you have left you find the bathrooms with showers and the living quarters.

Great. *Now why couldn't the singing girl have been in the shower instead? That would have been a show worth watching.*

You check in each one, carefully, in case someone is napping somewhere. It looks like four beds to a room as bunks on either side, with bits of paraphernalia scattered about to personalize things a little. No people. You become more and more worried as you move down the hall, checking seven different rooms, and finding... nothing.

Somehow you've missed a set of stairs or something, because that's the whole building. You stand there, dumbfounded, looking in the final room and wondering how you missed it. *I suppose there could be stairs off the lounge.* You've been very methodical otherwise, haven't you? Now you'll have to go all the way back, and the minutes are ticking away and-

You turn and see a very large cyborg standing there, a very large gun in his hands, about three doors down. Great, it can get worse, you were either so lost in thought you didn't hear him or he's got stealth modifications so as to be nearly silent as he walks. He's obviously a full body replacement model, and big, meaning he's a walking tank. Your plastic bullets aren't going to do much against him. His gun on the other hand looks pretty deadly to you, should he choose to use it. You regard each other seriously a moment.

"Can I help you with something?" he asks finally.

"Actually you can," you answer, figuring you have nothing to lose at this point, right? There is the slim hope this person is exactly what they seem to be, a military officer, and not someone working for O.I.F. They've used unknowing people in the past, after all.

"I'm from NPC-PS, here on a case. I've been led to believe someone, a fairy to be exact, is being held here. I'm looking for her."

"Really?"

He's taking you seriously? This might work out after all! At the very least he's not sending hot lead your way, so go with it.

“Yes, really. I can show you my badge if you want, and talk with my CO, he’s aware of my mission.”

“Drop the guns and kick them over here, then get out your badge and we’ll see if your story checks out.”

You put the safeties on your guns and slowly set them down, then give them a shove down the hallway. He takes a couple of steps forward and picks up one, ejecting the clip, and then does the same with the other.

“Plastic bullets, huh?”

“I didn’t want to seriously hurt anyone, but I couldn’t be sure this place was legitimate. It relates to my mission.”

“I noticed some people knocked out on my way in here. Thank you for not killing them, as I take it you easily could have. That’s the only reason we’re talking now, by the way.”

“I figured that.”

“Now the badge.”

You ease it out of your inventory, if such a thing is even possible, and put that on the floor and kick it over to him. He picks it up as well, without taking his eyes off you. He takes a couple of steps back and hands it to someone around the corner. “Check this out.”

“Right away sir,” says a voice.

He comes back to give you the close up view of the wrong end of his weapon, and you both stare at each other.

“It’s a nice facility,” you offer, to fill the silence.

“Thank you. It’s not much, but someone has to train the recruits. We can’t all be PCs, after all. And they have to get their average ratings from somewhere.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Are you back early then? I was under the impression your training exercise wouldn’t be over for some time.”

“No. When the door was opened, the camera automatically transmitted an image to me out in the field, safety precaution and all that. When I saw one of my soldiers being manhandled by an invisible person I figured something was up and came to investigate.”

“Ah.”

“Otherwise, well done getting in. We’ll have to install some infra-red sensors or something on the back door.”

“Well, that’s what training facilities are all about, right?”

“Yes, I guess you’re right.” He looks thoughtful. “That actually gives me an idea for a training exercise or two.”

“Oh, that guy I was, uh, manhandling? He’s tied up in the closet over there.”

“Check it out,” he calls over his shoulder.

“On it sir.”

“So you said a fairy?”

“That’s correct. Four people were abducted by a wizard that’s been giving us some problems lately, and we were given their locations. One of them was here, at this base, so I came to check it out.”

“Interesting. Very interesting,” he says, interested.

“Do you know anything about it?”

“No, but a wizard was recently posted here, and the paperwork was a little odd. I’ve been keeping an eye on him, but he hasn’t done anything suspicious. Until just a little while ago, anyway. Right after I got the notification that someone had come in here I asked him if he could get me some more information about the intruder. He said he would and started casting magic spells. Then he said, and I quote, “oh crap, he showed up instead of Rose? I’m dead!” Then he cast another spell and Teleported away.”

“Rose? You’re sure he said Rose?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s the daughter of the person I’m trying to find. Rose Petal, she’s a fellow NPC-PS agent!”

The man’s lip curls a little bit, and his eyes narrow. “I knew something was fishy with him. Stupid wizards, and their stupid magic.”

“I’ll take all I can get, pointed away from me. If it helps my team survive, I’m all for it.”

“I guess you’re right, it is useful stuff.”

Another man comes around the corner holding your badge. “He’s legit,” he says to the cyborg, handing the badge over. “He’s supposed to be here, and his story checks out.”

“How about that? Put a notice out I want that wizard detained if he shows up around here again, which I doubt. Have everyone start looking around for a fairy, this guy says there’s one around here someplace.”

“Yes sir.”

He hands your badge back. “Clayton, is it?”

“That’s me, thank you sir.”

“The name’s Mathew Kinghorn,” he says, putting his gun over his shoulder, where it sticks like magic. Probably magnets in the gun attaching it to his metal frame. He holds his hand out. “Nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you too. Thanks for not shooting first and asking questions later.”

“Like I said, you injured rather than killing, so I figured something odd was happening. Nice arms, by the way. Had them long?”

“About three years. My real ones got pretty messed up when I tried to save my mother from a gang. You?”

“I’m a lifer. Figured I’d go the distance, get my body replaced as it was starting to break down on me. I love being in the thick of things, so this body made sense for me. Can’t say I regret it either.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what are you doing out here then?”

“Training my team! These aren’t just some random soldiers, you know? They may not be PCs, but they’ve got the drive to learn a lot of skills, and I’ll only go on missions with people I’ve trained myself. Fewer people get killed that way. Another year or so and we’ll be ready for real missions, the important ones, that everyone else says is impossible. My team gets them done and gets back alive.”

You nod, understanding.

“You were just drafted yourself, right?” Naturally your badge shows the date of your joining NPC-PS, so the question is largely rhetorical.

“That’s right.”

“When your five years is up, if you’re still interested in the service come look me up. We could use a man with your skills. One who’s not afraid to enter what could be hostile territory, alone, and rescue a hostage if need be. Especially one that knows how much force to use, not too little, and not too much. That kind of thing is hard to teach, if you know what I mean.”

“Thanks for the offer, I’ll definitely keep it in mind.”

“Good man. Now let’s go find your fairy!”

You walk with him back to the main entrance, and see the people you knocked out being treated in the hospital room.

“Sorry about that,” you shout in, a bit sheepishly.

“They had it coming!” says Mathew, laughing. “Reading on duty, he could have been shot for real, and by someone who wouldn’t be all ‘sorry’ at the end either.”

“Nothing ever happens here!” the camera watcher whines.

“Shut it!” shouts Mathew. “This guy just proved you wrong, grunt. Something happened, and bang, you’re dead. You should be thanking this guy your brains aren’t currently splattered all over that room, not

whining to me. You can send him some flowers later. Now get back to work!”

“Yes sir!” He salutes and runs off.

Several people are crowding the hall now, and all of them report they haven’t seen a fairy.

“Did you check the wizard’s stuff?” Mathew asks.

“I did sir,” one says.

“I don’t know what else to tell you,” he says, turning to you. “This place isn’t that big, as you probably already saw. If they say there’s no fairy, then there’s no fairy.”

You think a moment. “She’s probably frozen, how big a freezer do you have?”

“Well, I don’t know. Who’s on KP duty right now?”

“I am sir!” says a voice, and the woman you saw dancing and singing comes up.

“Well, how big a freezer do we have?”

“You think the fairy is in the freezer sir?”

“No, he does. Go check it out!”

“Yes sir.”

She walks off, and various people come and go, reporting the places they’ve checked.

“Thanks for helping with this, I appreciate it.”

“Not at all. Gives the grunts something new to talk about instead of just complaining all the time. Shakes up their perceptions a bit, never a bad thing.”

A few minutes later the woman returns with a small block of ice she’s holding in a pot holder. “I found her sir, but she’s probably dead. I mean, look at her, she’s completely frozen. I’m sorry.” She looks quite sad to be delivering this news, or possibly sad for the fairy, or perhaps she has gastrointestinal distress and wishes she could be elsewhere at the moment.

Now it’s your turn to laugh. “You really found her! That’s great. I should have thought about finding the freezer right off!”

“How can you laugh when this poor fairy is dead?” the woman asks, shocked.

“She’s not dead. It’s a magic spell, I’ve seen it a couple of times. It’s a favorite of this wizard we’re trying to track down. Thaw her out and she’ll be fine. Just stick her outside for a few minutes, it’s hot enough out there to do the job.”

“I hope you’re right,” she says, and everyone troops out into the sun, where the block of ice is set on the ground and everyone gathers around to watch.

“You might want to put a few more points into your dancing skill,” you whisper to her. “But your singing is pretty good.”

She immediately colors. “You saw that?” she hisses at you. “I only do that when no one else is around. If you tell anyone...”

You chuckle. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me.” You tap the side of your head, by your cyber eyes. “Of course, one day I might need cash so what do you think the video I took of you would be worth?”

“You didn’t!” she says, shocked.

“No, I didn’t. I had more important things to do at the time so I didn’t even think about it.”

“You better not have.”

You all wait while the ice melts, which like you figured doesn’t take long in this heat. With a little gentle pulling the ice is broken off Rose’s mother and she starts breathing again, shivering and looking around dazed.

A cheer goes up when it seems like she’s safe and going to be okay.

“What is going on here?” demands the little fairy, and you can see the resemblance to Rose. “And why do I have this tiny scrap of paper in my inventory?”

Looks like you have some explaining to do, but it seems like everything is going to be all right.

Chapter 16.3

Big Rescue

You are Rose, about to have your first adventure without Jaden to back you up. You are understandably nervous.

You can do this, you think to yourself. You are a powerful magic user, have fairy abilities most people don't know about like turning invisible and growing larger, and you can talk to animals. You will go in, find Jake's little brother and get him out of there.

“Nearly there!” shouts the pilot to you, over the roar of the engine.

You nod your head, there's no way you're going to make yourself heard over that racket. Apparently the coordinates given to you by O.I.F. are in the middle of some ancient, abandoned city, so NPC-PS is flying you out there. It's kind of weird, this big, burly guy taking orders from little old you, just because you're a PC and he's not. That's the way of the world, you guess. You buzz over to the window and look out, and yes the pilot is descending. The plan is to open the cockpit door and you will jump out. It really won't be long now. You make sure your wand is secure in your inventory, with that you can make just about anything else you might need, so it's your most precious possession. Next to Jaden, of course.

You wonder how that cute little Belquis is getting on, and are caught up in a little daydream until the guy shouts again. “Are you going?”

You shake yourself out of it, then give him a thumbs up and head to the front of the cockpit. It's a fighter plane so there's only one way on or off, and that's through the canopy. The pilot has slowed to the minimum speed the plane can maintain and cracks the glass enough for you to crawl through. The wind tears at your clothes and wings, both of which probably would have been ripped off if not for your Invulnerability. You make it out and let go, the plane zipping underneath you. The canopy goes down again and the plane banks and takes off, leaving you falling through the air. You take a good look as the ground gets closer and closer, and just at the last second you spread your wings, pulling out of the dive. There's a tree here that will serve and you come to a graceful stop atop a large leaf. The leaf bobs a little under your weight, and you look around

again, trying to put the overhead view together with this one to see where you might hide a person trapped in ice. The problem is this place is huge, so really, it could be anywhere.

You put your dress into your inventory with relief, these humans and their hang up with clothes. It would be comical if they weren't all so sincere about the whole thing. The sunlight feels great and you stand for a moment, arms outstretched, feeling the cool breeze tousle your hair and touch every part of you.

Much better!

Now to work!

"My tree."

"What?" You look over, and there's a bird standing there. It has a brown, rather stout body, shimmery black wings, and sharp looking beak. "Oh, hello."

"My tree."

"Yes, so you said. Don't worry, I'll be moving along in just a moment. Tell me, have you seen any odd goings on around here?"

"You actually understand me?" the bird asks, shocked.

"Of course, I'm a fairy."

"I've never talked to a fairy before, this is very interesting!"

"I've talked to plenty of birds, but not one like you. I'm pretty far away from home at the moment."

"You think I'm pretty?" asks the bird, spreading his wings and posing for you. The sun hitting his wings makes them shimmer, they are probably a point of pride for him, just like your wings are for you.

"You must take excellent care of them to make them shine like that," you answer. "You are very pretty."

"Oh. Oh. Oh. How about my tail?"

You have come, in your long association with the animals around Jaden's house, to discover that talking to them doesn't mean they have anything interesting to say.

"I really need to know if anything strange has been happening around here," you press.

Suddenly the bird looks up. "Bye!" he shouts, taking to wing.

"Wait!" Well, shoot, that didn't help you at all.

Suddenly you see a shadow and something pounces on you from behind, and you are pinned down by a talon. You crane your neck upwards to see what looks like a hawk beak descending towards you, and you calmly wait until this silly bird decides he's not getting anywhere

trying to eat you.

“What is wrong with this morsel?” he asks, annoyed. “I can’t seem to eat it.”

“Of course you can’t eat me, you great brute of a bird. I’m a fairy as you can plainly see!” Naturally it’s your bracelet that protects you from harm, but you’re sensing fairies aren’t real big on living around here for one reason or another, as this guy obviously doesn’t recognize you as such either. So it doesn’t hurt to tell a little white lie that might save some fairy from being gobbled up in the future.

“It can speak!”

“If you don’t let me up this instant I’ll do more than that!” The bird hastily steps back and you dust yourself off, glaring at him. “I want an apology.”

“I’m sorry I can’t eat you, as you look delicious.”

Wow, you think, what a difference context makes. Jaden saying that to you some hot summer night you both can’t sleep, but instead do something much more fun, wouldn’t seem creepy at all. This guy saying though-

“Fairies are not for eating, so remember that!”

“I will. I did not realize you knew a proper mode of speech. I would not have attacked you if I had. Can I do something for you to make up for my oversight?”

“I just need to know if you’ve seen anything, apart from me, that’s seemed strange around here in the last day or so.”

“I have not. The old place is still old. The hunting is good, all is right.”

He seems a little more cogent than the last bird, but no more helpful. “Then I will be on my way.”

“Very well. May you have fine eggs,” he says, flapping his wings and taking off again into the sky.

“Actually, I’m hungry for eggs right now,” you say quietly. You take to wing yourself, and are surprised to see a cleared area, leading to some old ruins not that far away. There’s a path here, it looks like- Of course, you think to yourself, Jake was supposed to come here, not me! A way was probably prepared for him so he didn’t spend weeks wandering around these ruins. You hover closer to the path, kicking a few rocks out of the way. Yes, there’s grass and other plants under there, so this was just done. All you have to do is follow the path, easy!

You head in towards the ruins, flying low near the ground when

you see something odd. It's a wire stretched across the path, so thin as to be almost invisible. Curious, you head to one side where it seems to trigger a trap of some sort. There's a block of stone with some holes cut in it. You jump up and down on it, but you don't have enough mass to do more than bend it. You hate to leave it here for some other poor sap to run into, but at the same time you hate to spend energy on magic to make it go away.

You ponder for a moment.

Then you see something that might just do the trick! A squirrel is bounding from tree to tree right near you, so you fly up to him.

"Hi there, Mr. Squirrel!" you say brightly.

"Is that- it is, there's a fairy here! Why there hasn't been a fairy here since, well, before my great-great-great-great you get the idea."

"Why is that, if you don't mind my asking."

"Stories say man and fairy lived in magical harmony around here long ago. When this became ruins, both man and fairy moved on and never came back."

Interesting. Not relevant, but interesting. Also interesting is the fact squirrels are a lot more knowledgeable about things than birds. Which you guess makes sense, they are ground creatures.

"Did you see what made that weird path?" you ask, pointing back to the gravel road you were flying above.

"I saw the path being made, but not what made it. Came in, oh, before now."

What? Oh, right, a squirrel is not going to be able to distinguish between "yesterday" and "a few days ago" because everything is either "before" or "now." You can't blame him, even though technically your brains might be the same size, yours is magical and bigger on the inside.

"So it just appeared there?"

"That's right. Oddest thing. Oh, I saw a man walk it too!"

"How long ago?" you ask, before you can stop yourself.

The squirrel looks at you oddly. "He is not there now."

"Forget I asked. Can you help me with something?"

The squirrel seems to consider. "I was looking for something to eat. Really I guess I'm always doing that. It should keep. What do you need?"

"Come over here and I'll show you."

You direct him to bite through the line with his sharp little teeth,

which he does. There's a noise and blades come shooting out of the holes, just as you suspected.

"Thank you," you say to him.

"Fairies do weird things," he says, almost to himself. "Say, you aren't headed down to the below here, are you?"

"The what?"

"The darker place! If you follow this path, I did it before now, you come to the entrance to the below here. There's no food there, and danger, my mother said."

"I must rescue someone from there, so it looks like that is where I'm going. But thank you for the warning."

"Sure thing," he says, bounding off.

You stand looking at the trap a moment. It wasn't a very good one, it made that noise before shooting out. What good would that do as a trap? Come to think of it, doesn't Jake have an ESPer skill that warns him of danger? Weird. You hurry on, and find three more traps concealed on the path, all seemingly as useless as the first. The last being right at the entrance, which seems to cause a large amount of stone to fall from above. This Jake could easily have avoided or deflected with Telekinesis, in your estimation. You resolve to take them all out on your way back, so someone doesn't get hurt here, and fly into the ruin. The building is crumbling stone, and much darker on the inside. This building was made by magic using people at some point in history, you can tell. The question is, was it the good kind of magic using people or the bad kind?

The bad kind, you think, as you dodge another magical blast of energy and get smart, reversing your course to stop triggering these things. You've only gone a little way into the ruin and already you've set off a couple of magical traps. They have shot fire, chunks of ice, and even rocks at you. You need to stop and think about this rather than just blundering into everything. It's only your Magic Sense and small size that's been saving you. That, and your 7 REFlexes.

Stop and think a minute, you say to yourself. *What's going on here?*

You ponder a bit, and think you have a partial answer. *Jake was supposed to come through here, right?*

Right, you answer yourself.

And like your magic, his powers take a little energy to activate, right?

Right.

And all this magic, and the traps outside were of a physical nature, making him use his Telekinesis to get past them, thus draining his energy!

Of course!

There may even be more traps here you aren't even triggering, like pressure plates. Those are popular in old ruins, right? Still, if you're more careful and don't go blundering into stuff, you should make it through okay, you feel.

You proceed more slowly, making Magic Sense checks every few feet and avoiding or harmlessly setting off the traps you encounter. The ruins go underground, looks like someone had fun with the Passageway spell, or probably Soft Stone to generate the side rooms. You weave your way down the halls, and it doesn't take long for the light to totally fade, impeding your forward progress.

"Humph," you say to yourself.

You take out your wand and create a grade 0 sun spell of light, which is about as good as a single candle. A candle is pretty big for you though, so that seems to work much better, and you continue on.

To a pile of bones.

Curse my Curiosity, you think to yourself, flying down to inspect the bones. Weird, how did all these bones-

The bones stir, and you hear a word spoken.

"Attack!"

The bones have become skeletons, *probably the Undead Army spell* you think, and will yourself invisible.

Naturally they see your little ball of light, but without anything to actually "attack" they just sort of stand there. You count six of them, and this further strengthens your belief these things are just here to slow Jake down. Make him use his ESPer powers, draining his energy and making him vulnerable to whatever is no doubt guarding his brother.

You shiver and move on, the undead give you the creeps, they're just not natural.

You come to a place that's lit up and turn off your ball of light, silently winging your way forward. In the middle of a large, carved out area, is a small boy encased in ice. You made it! Sitting in front of him, apparently asleep or meditating is a scruffy looking man, probably an ESPer. So is this the one that was going to fight Jake for the privilege of getting his brother back? You are not going to give him the satisfaction

of even knowing you were here- it's time to use a skill you've practiced a lot but never used that much in the field, Subtle Casting!

Normally, magic is pretty intense, you think, as though reviewing in your mind what makes Subtle Casting so special. Magic creates circles of light and energy wherever the target is, so it draws attention to itself. One can, however, with practice learn to suppress these effects to an extent, which is what you are going to do now. You flit behind the ice block and make sure he didn't hear you. Nope, looks like he's just sitting there. You mean him no harm, so his ESPer skills of detecting danger will be nice and relaxed, just like he is. Excellent.

You make the check, getting a fourteen. Normally this becomes the difficulty of succeeding on a perception check to see the magic circle. This guy has his eyes closed, so there's no way the light left over is going to disturb him. You then cast your new favorite spell, Shrink, on the ice block. Seems fourteen is the number of the day, even after spending five energy and taking three extra segments to cast the spell that's your result. Sheesh! Still, the difficulty of the spell was an eleven, almost as if you had planned it that way. The ice block shrinks down, which you concentrate on being as slow as possible so as not to alert the so called guard. As it's now small enough for you to carry, you do, lifting it with little difficulty and walking awkwardly from the room. The man still hasn't stirred, maybe he is asleep? Your Curiosity wants you to find out, but seriously, even you aren't that foolish. You walk to just in range of the light and set the tiny ice block down, preparing to cast Teleportal and get you both out of here. You again take the extra time, spend almost maximum energy, and open a tiny portal. This one is just big enough for you to fit through. You carry the tiny ice chunk through and let the shrink spell go, watching as it expands to full size again.

Then you get a naughty, naughty idea.

You step back through the portal and let it go, then create your tiny light again. Winging your way back to the skeletons that are milling about, you put your plan into action. You turn your invisibility off, and they spot you, raising weapons that they must have found scattered about that you didn't see before. You flit ahead of them, leading them on towards the guard, who they immediately run to attack.

Now his danger sense goes off, as his eyes snap open and get wide, as he sees 6 undead skeletons advancing towards him, weapons raised!

You giggle almost uncontrollably and head back down the passage. You're not worried about the guy, if he thought he could take Jake,

and O.I.F. thought Jake could take these skeletons, all will be well. They aren't that sturdy, in the end, he'll probably finish them off fast. It'll shake him up nicely though. Especially afterwards when he's scratching his head as to how the ice block disappeared out from under his nose!

You again open the Teleportal back to base, and see what you can do to get this little guy thawed out!

Chapter 16.4

Big Rescue

You are Jaden, about to have a solo adventure, without Rose's magic to back you up. Your Insecurity weakness is telling you how much you are going to fail this mission, let every one down, die, and leave Rose alone and heartbroken for all eternity.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but that's as far as you can go in that vehicle," says the park ranger, leaning in through your window. "It's just forest and mountains in that direction for a hundred miles."

"That can't be right," you protest. "I'm nowhere near the place I have to get to, there has to be a road!"

"No roads, no trails, and no way to approach by air, I'm sorry. Whatever is up there, you're going to have to do without it. Unless you want to walk."

"What if I requisitioned a heli- what did you say?"

"No air travel. Do you know what this place is?"

You shake your head.

"Dragon country. They don't appreciate noisy vehicles in their air space, that's for sure. That's why I'm here, to warn people. Lots of wizards come down here looking to score unicorn's horns or dragon blood or whatever. Others just want to come 'see a dragon' which is foolish. Not that they'll just eat you up you understand, but they don't like to be bothered. And get too close to their lair and they'll think you're after their treasure! They don't like that, no they don't."

"Wait, unicorns and dragons in the same area?"

"Sure. The magical creatures and animals stick together. Dragons usually use magic to feed themselves, otherwise they would be hunted down and killed because of how much meat they would be eating per day. So the unicorns and fairies and what have you gather here, because they know the dragons live around here too. They do favors for the dragons and get protection in exchange. It's a pretty good system, really."

"So I can't go any further?"

"You can, there's a place to park right over there." He points to the area by his guard house, I guess you would call it, that's been cleared.

“But I can’t be held responsible for what happens to you after you go in there.”

“Fine.” You pull over and park the vehicle, putting the GPS coordinates into your phone. You get out.

“By the way, how long would it take me to reach these coordinates, anyway?” You show him the display on your phone.

“I’ve got a map of the area, let me go get it.” He goes back into the building and comes out with a large sheet of paper, marked with a grid. “You’re here right now, at this edge. From the looks of your image, it’s right smack dab in the middle. Figure at least six days travel from here, and there are some mountains in the way. So that estimate is if you’re a good mountain climber, too. If not... well, you might die. Do you have a horse that can stick to mountains? I always wanted one of those. That could help.”

“Great! Now what I am supposed to do?”

“Can you tell me what’s so important you need to go over there?”

“I’m with NPC-PS, working a case. My friends and I all got a family member stolen from us by a wizard that’s been causing us some problems. We’re trying to get them all back at the same time. That’s why I need to get to this place quickly. Is there anything you can do?”

He shakes his head. “Sorry, I just keep people out. Never had anyone so desperate to get in before. I’m not sure what to tell you.”

“Okay,” you decide, “I’m going to try something. If I don’t come back by nightfall, it’s worked, and I’ll be back for my car by the next day or so. I hope. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck?” he says, somewhat hesitantly. You grab a bag of stuff out of the trunk, put it into your inventory so you don’t have to carry it, then turn and march into the forest.

You keep one eye on your GPS unit so you know you’re heading in the right direction. Walking for about an hour, you come to a good spot, a partial clearing. You sit down on a fallen tree and calm yourself, remaining still and thinking good thoughts. You push the repetition of “this is never going to work, this won’t work, you’re an idiot” out of your mind. It’s a card. It has to work. Right?

“I declare the use of card 41,” you say softly, and the card with the dark haired girl on the phone appears, then disappears. You close your eyes and say more loudly: “Spirits of the forest, hear me and come to my aid! My name is Jaden Shan, known to my lifelong friend, the fairy Rose Petal. I have known and loved like my own sister almost my whole life.”

Well, you hedge to yourself, maybe a really hot step-sister in some kind of Japanese cartoon. Most sisters don't do what we do together, at least I think. The principle is the same, right? “I humbly beg your assistance. I must reach the center of the dragon’s territory swiftly to save the father of another friend of mine, who was cruelly taken from his home by a wizard, my enemy. Always have I respected nature, and the power and wisdom of the fairies. Rose Petal has taught me much about the balance of nature and about her people. Please, you are my only hope now if I am to reach him before the wizard discovers me and moves him, or worse. Please, I have never wished harm to a fairy or a flower, a beetle or a tree. I mean you no harm now. Will you help me?”

Your words fade into the trees, and you try hard not to give into your insecurity that this will never work. You wait a moment, then open your eyes. Before you is a small fairy, a man, and he’s looking you over. He has dragonfly wings, and a leaf as a loincloth. His hair is a light blue, and he has what seems to be a tattoo on one arm, like a bracelet. You resist the urge to start babbling at him and scare him off, and wait until he speaks.

“You know Rose Petal then?” he asks you.

“Yes, she came to me as a small child, and we’ve been together ever since.”

“She was always one for getting into mischief.”

“You know her too?”

“I did, years ago. Before she left the forest.”

“Wait, this forest? She left *this* forest? How did she come so far?”

He laughs. “No, no, I’ve moved since then, many times. Some fairies go where the wind takes them. Others take a shine to a person or place and stay with them for life. Some fairies protect trees, others protect animals that might not be able to fend for themselves. Still others, well, they protect the people close to them, and I guess that’s you in this case.”

“I guess it is. Can you help me?”

“Maybe. You do have a fair look about you, and an honest one.”

He suddenly flies up. “All right everyone, she’s okay, you can come on out!”

Suddenly, all around you, a dozen or more fairies appear. They were not helpless, many of them with magical spells held, ready to fire off, dismiss them as they come over. It seems if you were an enemy to fairy kind, you wouldn’t have lived much longer... The fairies are

all shapes and sizes, both male and female, some wearing things, some not. Some holding bits of wood or other things they must use to focus their magic, like Rose does, others not. Some have butterfly wings, some dragonfly. Their hair and skin are all colors of the rainbow, and you can't help smiling to see them.

They all start talking at once, crowding around in the air in front of you, asking about you, and the outside world, and about Rose, and the original fairy holds up a hand and shouts "Peace!" The others quiet down.

"Let the lady think," he says. "I'm sure she'll be able to answer all your questions later. Come, let us dine, and maybe we can come up with a solution to help you with your little problem."

You follow them into the forest and come to what must be a fairy village. There're little houses and everything.

"With your permission," a fairy says to you, "I'll take you down to a more appropriate size."

"Oh, a Shrink spell? Yes, that'll be fine!"

He casts the spell, and you get smaller and smaller, until you're the size of the rest of the fairies. They bring out a lot of fruit and nuts and things to eat, and it turns into a sort of party. Of course, "a lot" of fruit to a fairy is maybe one strawberry, and you sit and laugh and eat with the others, and learn a little about them as they learn about you. Some of them speak better Human Language than others, and all are happy to hear you talk in order to learn more. It seems fairies actually speak a different language than humans! How odd is that! Other languages, who would have thought of such a thing?

Soon the food is put away and the original fairy, who you know now as Hail Stone, gets everybody quiet again.

"Well Jaden, you've shown yourself to be a friend to fairies, so we'll help you as we can. But it won't be easy. We don't know any magic to make you fly, because we can all fly, so we never learned any! But we could get you a steed. There's a unicorn that hangs around these parts, but she's sensitive to her color. She may ask you to do something for her, and of course we can't make her help you, that's up to you. She's the only one that could get you where you need to go because she knows a lot of speed magic. She loves to run, and I'm sure she'd be willing to carry you to where you need to go. Her name is Cieta, and we'd be happy to introduce you."

"I could meet a real, live, unicorn?" you say, excited. "No one sees

unicorns, not ever! Some people still don't believe they actually exist, and you're saying I might be able to ride one?"

"That's right. I guess you're willing to make the attempt."

"Is it... is it dangerous?"

"I don't rightly know. We've never asked something like this of her before. But she's a friend to us, and we know her well. Where she grazes is not far, so we'll take you to her and you can do the rest."

"I will, for that chance. Oh, thank you so much!"

"Not at all. Maybe some day when you're not on business you can stay with us awhile, and tell us stories of the big people world, and dance with us, and make merry."

"Oh, I would so love to do that, I love dancing!"

"I wish you had said so earlier! Still, we've taken enough of your time. Acorn Top, release the shrink spell, and everyone stand clear. No offense, but being without wings, we'll have to make what time we can to Cieta's glade with you walking."

"I'm ready, let's go!"

The fairy returns you to normal size and you take off after Hail Stone, wanting to run and run until you see this unicorn. You hold yourself back.

You'll never be able to ride her, a voice inside you says. *You'll screw it up somehow.*

No I won't, you answer it, thinking maybe you should buy off Insecure after all...

A short time later Hail Stone stops you, and says he's going on ahead to let Cieta know you're coming. You agree, it would be no good to just crash your way through her glade and scare her off. You wait. It seems like forever, but you know it's only minutes later that he comes back and says she's ready to meet you. You take a deep breath and step through the bushes that surround this place.

There stands the unicorn.

She's a perfect chestnut brown, with golden hooves and a glittery, silver horn. She stands taller than you, sleek, strong and proud. Her tail the only indicator of her nervousness, as it swishes back and forth jerkily. In the most pragmatic sense, she is just a horse who happens to have a horn, through magic. But standing before her, there's just something

magnetic about her appearance, as she seems to attract the eye and the heart. Is it just part of a unicorn's magic that captures the human imagination so? Or is the horn, the intelligence in the eyes, the regal bearing, everything about this creature that makes you want to run and throw your arms around her? Oh, you're in love, and the thought of riding such a fine creature is almost more than you can stand.

"You're beautiful," you breathe, transfixed.

"Oh. Um, thank you," the unicorn replies.

"You can talk?" *Okay, maybe she's not just a horse with a horn.*

"Can't everybody?"

"I never heard of a unicorn talking, even in stories. I mean sure, I've talked to a dolphin just recently so I guess I should have expected it. But to hear you talk my language- oh this is wonderful! Can- can I hug you?"

Cieta snorts. "I guess she'll do," she says to Hail Stone.

"Then our part is done. I wish you luck, Jaden Shan, friend of Rose. You are always welcome among the fairies. And bring Rose back to see us sometime. She needs time among her own people too, you should remind her."

"I will, and I'll come to visit, and bring lots of great things to eat, and games and all kinds of things, I promise!"

"You do know how to speak our language! We'll look forward to it!"

The fairies depart, leaving you alone with this wonderful creature you ache to ride. "Well," she says "Now that they're gone, I can tell you why they brought you to me."

"Is there some way I can help you? I'll do anything, just name it! But I'm just a martial artist, I'm not really good at anything." *Shut up Insecurity! I know you're 2 points but go away for once!*

"It's a rather... delicate matter," she says, looking down.

"I won't tell anyone, if that will help."

"That reminds me." Cieta weaves her horn in the air, muttering something, and stamps her front hoof, and you feel a wave of magical power wash over you.

"Was there something else, Hail Stone?" she asks, looking past you.

"Ah, you're too smart for us, Cieta. You've got us, we'll go."

The fairies turn and fly away, and you both watch them go.

"They're good people, but curious and mischievous, as you may

know.”

“My friend Rose Petal likes to play tricks sometimes, so yeah, I know. Wait, is it magic that is letting you talk to me? You’re a spell-caster!”

“It is, and I am. Like my mother Lestia the dapple gray unicorn and my grandmother Nessia the black unicorn before her. Now that we’re alone I can tell you. It’s not easy to talk about.”

“Take your time,” you say, seething at yet another delay.

“The fact is, I’m not really welcome in my herd because of my color.”

“Appalling! You’re a perfectly fine color, if it even mattered, which it doesn’t.”

“They don’t think so. I’m a horse color. Unicorns are supposed to be a nice pastel pink, or white, or aqua or blazing red. I’m just... brown.”

“You are not *just* brown!” you say strongly.

“Maybe to your eyes. Anyway, I’m kind of an outcast so I do a lot more wandering around than most unicorns, just like my mother and grandmother before me. I... kind of... met someone. And we kind of... fell in love.”

“Oh, that’s so great!”

“Normally, yes. He’s an outcast too, of sorts, so we really understood each other and got along well. He helped me master some of my grandmother’s spells, and I helped him in his research, and didn’t laugh at his peculiarities. We’ve been together a couple of years now, and it’s been great, but I kind of want to marry him.”

“That is so sweet! A unicorn getting married, it’ll be one for the history books.”

“I know. He says it’s kind of foolish, we’re already together after all. The fairies tell me stories about human weddings they’ve seen and I just want to make that commitment to him.”

“I know how you feel. But can a human even marry a unicorn? I mean, I could probably marry Rose,” you blush furiously, “but we’re both human... shaped? Same sex marriage isn’t prohibited, but I don’t think any human has ever married a fairy before. I guess if you went in disguise with magic-”

“He’s not a human.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, I just assumed- and that it was a he! Is the one you love a fairy?”

“No.” She hesitates. “He’s a dragon.”

“You’re in love with a dragon?” Your eyes are wide, that wasn’t what you were expecting to hear.

“Silly, isn’t it?”

“No, I think it’s so romantic! Oh, to have watched you two get together, and gently fall in love with each other. I bet that would make a fantastic tale! If you one day cared to tell it, I mean.”

“That’s the main problem,” she says. “It’s not like we want to hide our relationship, exactly, but we already live on the fringe of our species. We don’t need any sort of scandal to make us feel worse. Maybe one day our story can be told, but not today.”

“So what can I do? I’ll help in any way I can, of course, but-”

“I just want you to witness it, and sign the contract that says we’re married. That’s all.”

“Oh, because you can’t ask a fairy or a unicorn to do it.”

“Exactly. If a fairy found out, the whole forest would know in about... three seconds? And by the whole forest I mean every mouse, every bird, every tree, every unicorn, every dragon... they’d probably use magic to tell the rocks, and the flowers. You get the idea.”

“I see your problem.”

“So you’ll help us?”

“It would be an honor to help you two get married,” you say, a tear in your eye.

“I’ll, uh, take that hug now.”

You run forward and throw your arms around Cieta’s neck, holding her close. “Oh, I’m so happy for you!”

“I admit I’m a little nervous now, actually.”

“Well don’t be, everything will be fine. Come on, let’s go see this dragon lover of yours, I can’t wait to meet him.”

“Okay, I’ll let you ride there. I’ll use Acceleration magic, it won’t take long. I learned this spell from Nessia, it was her favorite too.”

“Oh,” you say, “I never even thought of that. I’ve never ridden before! I guess I can do it untrained...”

“Don’t worry, I won’t buck you off. And I can give you some pointers as we go. For now, just get up on my back and grab on with your knees.”

You bounce off a tree and swing up on Cieta’s back before she can even move.

“I could have bent down a little,” she says, lamely. “I guess that’s

the whole martial arts stuff you were talking about?”

“It’s come in handy,” you reply.

Cieta answers by again weaving her horn and calling on magic, and a large circle appears underneath her. She stomps all four feet in rapid succession and the spell goes off, and you feel her quiver underneath you as the Acceleration magic takes hold.

“Ready to fly?” she asks, “holding on tight?”

You clench your knees around her and take a gentle hold of her mane in case you need extra grip, She takes off at a gallop far faster than you thought possible.

“It’s not far,” she shouts, dodging trees at a blur. What a fantastic ride!

After a while you get the hang of holding onto her, and lean forward, almost laying down on top of her. “By the way, you said this dragon is more like you? Is he a non-standard color as well?”

Cieta laughs. “No, he doesn’t keep a treasure! He says he would rather research magic, or learn new stories or make up new stories or visit other lands. Instead of just piling gold up someplace and never doing anything with it, like most of his species does. Very untypical for a dragon.”

“I should say so!”

You close your eyes. Cieta’s hooves pounding beneath you, the heat of her body radiating up into you, as she dodges trees and leaps logs on her way to the dragon’s cave. You’re actually riding a unicorn, it’s like a dream, and you’re off to marry her and a dragon, which you’re pretty sure no one has ever done.

Wait, no, I’m off to witness their marriage, I’m not marrying them.

You never dreamed this could ever happen to you, and you never want this ride to end. You feel Cieta’s powerful muscles beneath you, and stretch out as much as you can while still hanging on. Now this... is magic!

“Oh, you want to go faster?” yells Cieta, lowering her head. “I could manage awhile. Hang on!”

You’re both laughing and shouting, the wind whipping your hair as the forest flies by you, almost a blur. The sure footed unicorn races across the green carpet of the forest. All too soon she breaks through the trees and races up a path, finally coming to a halt in front of a cave, breathing heavily.

You slide off, barely catching yourself as your feet in the ground, and you walk around Cieta, holding on to her while you compose yourself again.

“Haven’t... run, like that... for a long... time,” Cieta says to you. “Felt good.”

You give her a big hug again. “That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever experienced,” you say, “Thank you so much.”

“I had some nervous energy to work out,” she says, and you both start laughing again. A head pops out of the cave and looks around, confused.

“Cieta, is that you? What are you doing with a human?” it asks in a low voice. “You know you don’t have to bring me morsels, my magic provides for me just fine.”

“Don’t be silly, Vexixarax, she’s here to marry us!”

“Well, I know you’ve wanted to marry me for some time, but the girl hasn’t even met me, why would she want to marry me as well?”

Wait, didn’t I already do that joke?

“You know what I mean, you big tease,” she says, walking over and nuzzling the head. “Come out and say hello, she won’t bite.”

“Won’t bite a dragon, that’s a good one!”

A long dragon crawls from the cave, stretching his wings and yawning. He’s big, like all mature dragons, and his emerald green scales glitter in the sunlight. You can see the resemblance to the undersea dragons you met earlier, at least around the head.

“Jaden, meet Vexixarax, my beloved. Vexixarax, this is Jaden, she needs our help to rescue someone over the mountains. I thought if she would agree to witness our marriage, you might be willing to fly her there.”

“Hummmmm,” he says, looking this way and that at you. “You’ve ridden a unicorn today, do you know how rare that is?”

“Yes, I do Mr. Vexixarax, Sir. I’ll never forget it.”

“A polite one, isn’t she? I can see what you see in her,” roars Vexixarax, laughing. “And now you want a ride from a dragon. Do you think you’re worthy of such an honor?”

“Me, personally? No, probably not. I always try my hardest, but something inside me always says I’ll just mess it up.” Your Insecurity is talking again, apparently. “But I think my mission to save someone’s father from a wizard is a worthy one. I don’t ask for myself, but for Clayton, that I might rescue his father. I’ll be happy to see you two get

married, even if you don't help me afterwards, just so I can know you two are together."

"Interesting answer. I'll think about it. Come my dear, if we're going to do this, we should do it properly."

Cieta looks over at you, and you could swear she looked a bit confused, but she follows Vexixarax into the cave, and you follow behind. She traces her horn through the air a little ways in, and a ball of light appears and follows you. Vexixarax makes his way to the back of the cave. The passage is large, to accommodate his bulk, and you see books, vials of liquid, old weapons, and just general clutter inside the cave as you walk. Cieta notices you looking around.

"He often uses his shape shifting spell to become a man, so he has hands to work. And, uh, other things."

Can unicorns blush, you wonder?

"Anyway, he sometimes goes out and brings back things to study, and they get piled around. He's been alive a long time."

"I see," you answer, wondering just how long a "long time" is. He stops at the back of a large hollowed out area, and turns around.

"Girl, come with me. Cieta, wait here."

He turns back and growls something at the stone, which disappears, forming a passageway, and plods through it. You shrug at Cieta and follow. "My name is Jaden," you remind the dragon. That gravely sound could be him laughing? The light stays back with Cieta, and you're groping your way forward. Vexixarax growls something else and the candles in the room all light up. This reveals a sort of chapel, with a podium, stairs, and thousands of candles on every surface, making it almost look like the starry sky came down and landed here. It's beautiful, and you say as much to Vexixarax.

"If you like it, I suppose it'll do. I've been working on it for quite some time, since she started all this marriage business. I may not get married often, but when I do, I might as well do it right."

"You did all this yourself?"

"Do you think she'll like it?"

"You're just a big softy past all those teeth, aren't you? I like it, I'm sure she will."

"Don't spread it around, dragons have a certain reputation to maintain. I'm glad you like it. There is, of course, one other thing."

"Anything."

Vexixarax growls again, and upon the podium you see resting a quill and a sheet of paper.

“This is the Contract spell,” he explains. “I want you to write up something for me, and sign it. It should read, I, Jaden, do swear that after the dragon Vexixarax and the unicorn Cieta marry I will speak of it to no one, unless released from this binding by the dragon Vexixarax. Then sign your name. I’m sorry to have you do this, but you really must understand our position.”

“The first dragon/unicorn marriage? I understand.” You write the words, having to ask several times how to spell his name because his pronunciation of individual letters is a bit shaky and he keeps speaking Dragon at you. After showing them to Vexixarax, who nods, you sign the bottom. The quill disappears.

“You can keep the paper if you want, or burn it or whatever. The spell will still hold.”

“It’ll be a nice keepsake for me, as if I needed a reminder of today.”

“Do you even know how to marry us? I should have asked that earlier, actually.”

“I’ll think of something.”

You gently place, if such a thing is possible, the contract into your inventory. Vexixarax growls again, and what looks like a little human girl with a basket appears. You make a REASON check, but you fail to penetrate the Illusion. As far as you can tell, a real little girl walks back to the other side of the cave and makes a hand motion calling Cieta in. She steps in, and somehow she’s radiating light herself, which you again fail to recognize as Illusion because apparently you suck at REASON checks.

She calmly and slowly walks towards Vexixarax, the little girl throwing flower petals from her basket as she walks, until she’s beside him.

I’m going to mess it up, you think. Bad thought, out with the bad thought. My bad thought belongs to the Narrator. It is his words, not mine. “Vexixarax and Cieta, you have come here today to make a commitment to each other and with love in your hearts. Although your respective people might not understand you, an understanding has been created between you built of friendship and respect. Although you may be different on the outside, your love shows you are the same on the inside. Vexixarax, do you take this unicorn to be your wife, to love, to

protect, and never, ever, to eat, no matter how hungry you get?”

“Even if she were the last meat left and my magic was gone.”

You ponder a moment. Seems valid. “And do you, Cieta, take this dragon to be your husband, to stand with him against all other dragons, and, uhm, to offer your body to him if you were the last meat left?”

“If it could make him live but a moment longer, I would not hesitate to give my life for my love.”

Also valid.

“Then by the authority you have given me, I pronounce you husband and wife. You can-”

They can’t exactly kiss, can they? Uh...

Both of them start casting again, and suddenly both shrink. Vexixarax a lot and Cieta a little, both becoming human, embracing and kissing.

“Kiss the bride,” you finish, a bit lamely. They step away, smiling at each other, and are suddenly back in their original forms.

“Congratulations, you two,” you say, stepping out from behind the podium.

“That was really great, thank you,” says Cieta, touching you with her horn. “And you, working on all this in secret! I thought you didn’t want to get married!”

“I am still a dragon,” he answers. “When I find a treasure I want to keep it. I guess my treasures just don’t happen to be gold.”

“Oh, Vexi, I love you!”

Vexi, you think. Still, a tear rolls down your cheek, weddings are so nice, aren’t they?

“Ahem. A deal is a deal. Come Jaden, it is my wedding day! Let us away that I might return to my bride,” his voice drops even lower, “with all that entails!”

“Oh, you!” she says. “Goodbye, my new friend. When you come to visit the fairies, feel free to visit us as well. I would like that very much. I’m sorry we didn’t get much time to spend together but I want to get to know you better, if that’s okay?”

“I would like that, a lot. I want to hear about the adventures you and your family have been through.” *Wait, are these beings PCs or NPCs? Does that distinction even exist for them? But if she’s had adventures...* “You’ve given me something precious, I won’t ever forget.”

You hug her goodbye and take to the air on Vexixarax’s neck, his

powerful wings lifting you off the ground and speeding you towards the GPS coordinates. You have your binoculars out, and it's getting dark by this time. Not so much you'll have to switch to night vision just yet. You tell Vexixarax what to expect, after he does some magic so you can both talk over the wind. He says he'll keep an eye out for blocks of ice too. Suddenly you see it, there's a wide space that's been cleared, almost as if the top of a mountain had been sheered off. There's a small army circling the frozen block that holds Clayton's father.

"Hang on!" he shouts, diving. The men see this dragon screaming out of the sky and break formation, this probably wasn't the rescue attempt they had in mind. Vexixarax slams into the ice block with his four legs, talons crunching into the ice while his wings beat down, throwing the men back with a powerful wind. He inhales, and suddenly a stream of fire bursts forth from his mouth, driving them back even further. He pumps his wings again, taking off, and the men haphazardly fire into the air. He quickly outpaces them.

"So where are we headed now?" he asks you.

"Back to my car, at the edge of the forest. We can get him thawed out and I'll drive him home. Thank you, you were great back there."

"Putting those men in their place back there was highly satisfying. They needed to be reminded who controls this area."

You all soar back to the car, and Vexixarax casts a spell that melts the ice, bringing Clayton's father out, unharmed. You thank Vexixarax again, while Clayton's father stands transfixed by the huge dragon that's calmly talking to you. He takes his leave and flies off to "take care of business."

You can't help laughing, but sadly a magical contract keeps you from explaining to a bemused, middle aged man on your way back to base.

You get back and everyone is there, families once again reunited. Now directly under NPC-PS protection so they can't be Teleported away again, they're feeling more secure. You run to Rose and give her a big hug, glad she made it through.

"It was actually pretty easy," she says. "Yours?"

"It wasn't too bad. Say, Rose, after this is all over, let's get married, okay?"

Rose's eyes light up and she smiles a huge smile before her eyes go back in her head and she plummets to the ground.

“So is that a yes, or a no?”

“Rose?”

Chapter 16.5

Big Rescue

Aftermath

SMASH

“Idiots!” yells the invisible figure to the small group of anti-heroes in the room, after smashing something breakable to the floor.

“What were we supposed to do?” asks one.

“Yeah, we were told we would be fighting people that never actually showed up,” replies another. “They didn’t come for their own family member, like you thought.”

“If anything, it’s *your* fault for not anticipating- *hurk*.” The figure twitches, seemingly held by the neck, and is unable to finish his sentence.

“We had an agreement. I do something for you, and you do something for me, isn’t that right?”

“Put him down,” says a familiar voice, as a man in a sergeant’s uniform steps into the room. He’s wearing glasses, which he’s never done before. He seems to look directly where an invisible person would be to hold the man up like that. “Technically, you haven’t been able to do what you promised them, that’s why you need these four, to continue the experiment.”

“Three. Those three. How many times do I have to tell you, Clayton dies. Anyway, what does that have to do with it?”

“If you had done what you promised them, maybe they could have won in the first place. No matter which opponent they had.”

“If I could do that, I wouldn’t have needed to send them out, the experiment would be over!” The guy goes flying as though thrown, and looks around, massaging his neck. “Wait, you’re saying this is my fault?”

“I’m saying that even you can’t think of anything. Okay, they got their families back, but you can think of something else to trap them.”

“Do you know how much effort I put into making all those traps in the first place? It took me weeks! I want them captured! And I want that cyborg dead for nearly killing me! Stupid cards. Stupid Narrator!”

“You’re a lot more concerned about this than you- don’t tell me

you actually did what you said, gave them this location?”

“I had to be certain they would rescue all four, so I had four chances to catch them,” the figure says. “If they had just gone after one and found the information to be bogus, they might not have gone after the others.”

“I think you’ve been away from family too long. It wouldn’t have mattered even if you gave them nothing, the four would have gone after their family members regardless.”

There’s a pause.

“Yes, I suppose they would have.”

“Come here,” he says, holding out his hands. The others watch as he seems to take someone’s hands in his own. “We’ll just have to leave this place awhile. I don’t think I can stop them from coming here at this point. In fact they’ll probably insist on a full SWAT team, given what they’ve seen you do before this.”

“No,” says the other person stubbornly. “I won’t leave this place, it’s been my home for too long.”

“Do you think you can take them? There’s something about this group that’s different, almost like the Narrator has taken a special interest in them.”

“Don’t talk religion to me, the Narrator is just a story.”

“Whatever you say. How long do you think you have?”

“It’ll take them a while to break the encryption. I used a different cipher for each piece, so they’ll have to put it together.”

“So you can beef up your defenses here, and I’ll let you know what kind of team they want so you can plan for it. Maybe it’s better this way. You can capture them here and don’t need to worry about transporting them. It’s your home turf, after all, where better to take them down?”

His arms wrap around something. “Where would I be without your steady nerves?”

He seems to put his hand on an invisible chin. “Years behind in your research and without any military contacts at all.”

“Humm, I guess you’re right. Might as well keep you around then.”

The two figures lean in for a kiss, and the others wonder if they’re distracted enough to slip away. Watching someone kiss an invisible person is a little weird, especially as they can’t tell if it’s a man or a woman this guy in uniform is... oh my...

Chapter 17

Endgame

You are Jake, for it started with you, it should end with you.

“Nice job rescuing everyone without getting hurt,” Sergeant Draughon says to everyone at the meeting the next day. “All the abducted family members are back without harm, and each one had some sort of data on them that the techs are working on now. It seems you all had an easier time going after someone unrelated to you than you otherwise would have. As per your requests we’ve moved the rest of your families here as well, so they can be behind our barriers and not get Teleported away again. Once this invisible person is in custody they can all go home, so let’s hope it’s soon. Well done, all of you.”

Everyone looks around. Jaden is smiling widest of all, though she insists she can’t tell you anything about her mission. And what was that proposal after she got back that caused Rose to faint dead away? You wonder if she ever got an answer. Oh well, none of your business.

“Whatever resources, personnel, weapons, imbued items, armor, if you think you’ll need it to find this person and bring them in, it’s yours. Go in hard, fast, and bring them out alive. I want to know why this person has been taking people, seemingly for years, and making them disappear. Polish your skills while the techs work on getting you that address. We’re close now, I can feel it. I wish you all luck!”

After he leaves, Rose says she’s going to start working on learning a spell called Planer Hold, that will keep O.I.F. from teleporting away, should they believe they’re going to lose. Which, of course, they are. She’ll be maintaining that and an anti-invisibility sphere, so she won’t be of much use otherwise, but she’ll try her best. Jaden wonders if they can get some handcuffs with that spell on it, NPC-PS must deal with people who can Teleport all the time. Rose says she’ll go ask.

Clayton says he’s going to get used to moving around in a bullet-proof vest, raise his Armor Wearing skill a bit. Apparently wearing that light bending suit he checked out really slowed him down, and he might want to wear it in the future. That, and shooting stuff. Can’t forget the shooting stuff.

Jaden says she’s going to work on her gadgets some more, making

sure they work. Not that they've been much use so far, so they probably won't be this time either. Everyone reassures her they sound really interesting, and you never know what you're going to need in the field, so go for it.

As far as you're concerned, you'll probably get your Cryokinesis, Barrier, Rend, Combust, Magnetokinesis skill group up to a three, if you can manage it. It's all about changing things- by thinking about it.

Hardly any time passes at all and the address is revealed: It's a regular house in a regular town, part of a regular neighborhood.

"That can't be right," says Jaden, as you all crowd around the computer screen. You're looking at the street view map generated by Big Search Engine whose name is a big number but is in no way important to the story. "It's just a house."

"What did you expect? The ancient castle of Dracul," asks Clayton, doing the standard 'I'm trying to be a vampire' voice, "deep in the shrouded heart of the old country?"

"A police box, bigger on the inside than the outside?" you ask.

"A van, down by the river?" asks Rose.

"No- I don't know, just not a regular old house in suburbia, with rose bushes in front and a brightly colored mailbox."

"If this isn't another dead end," says Jaden.

"I'll tell you what," you say. "Jaden, decide in your mind that there is nothing on Earth that's going to stop you from going there. With a full team, us, guns blazing, whatever. Can you do that for me?"

"I guess?" she answers. She concentrates.

"Now, let's see what we can see about your future," you say, touching her on the arm.

You get a fourteen on your Premonition check, and get a flash of a feeling of satisfaction from Jaden.

"If you go there, it seems you'll be satisfied," you tell her.

"With what?"

"The outcome of going there, presumably."

"Okay," she says, "I guess even if we don't find O.I.F., as long as I'm satisfied I went, let's go!"

You tell Sergeant Draughton that the team has decided on a full insertion force to come in with you. Naturally, after enough wizards cast Planar Deflection on the place to prevent O.I.F. from leaving. This was

suggested by Rose when she went after handcuffs with Planer Hold on them. NPC-PS had tons, so she didn't bother learning that spell. She learned Thrust and Thaw instead, just in case someone gets iced. He again says whatever you need, and the plans are laid to bust into the house and finally put an end to O.I.F. once and for all.

Your friends decide to go in at 2:00 PM the next day, because people expect midnight for that sort of thing, right? The plan is for a group of wizards to Teleport another group of wizards to the four corners of the house. Those wizards will be holding the Planer Deflection spell, and let it go at the house, creating an instantaneous, overlapping area of "you can't get away." This is in case they have some sort of "I just noticed someone Teleporting in, I'm going to Teleport away" magic just like whatever took O.I.F. away when Clayton shot them. You four will go in, followed closely by SWAT members, both cyborgs and wizards. They'll hold off anything that comes out of the woodwork to eat you up, while you press on to finding O.I.F. and taking them in. Rose will have the anti-invisibility spell going so you'll be able to turn O.I.F. into "The Person Formerly Known as O.I.F." Then it'll be time to grab them, and slap the cuffs on. A van will be waiting to take them into custody, and wizards will begin questioning them and using magic to make sure it's the right person. Mission complete! Victory music!

Everyone gears up, makes sure they have maximum energy, and has turned in whatever cards they don't think are useful. (Clayton keeps all his, and keeps rubbing his hands together and laughing, which you're a little concerned about) Everyone stands ready at the four portals, wizards in front, ready to take the place by storm. They cast Teleportal, and the battle is joined!

You appear in the back yard, on a deck that leads behind you into a pool. Your team has decided to go in through the back doors that connect to the patio, while other teams break in through the garage and the front door. Five SWAT members in full gear and carrying rifles are behind you. Your Premonition is quiet, so you believe that you are not in immediate danger. Rose looks around and announces six people are in the house that are enemies, and she points down and to the right. The doors in front of you are glass, and closed, so Clayton raises his gun and puts several shots through them, shattering them. An alarm goes off inside the

house, making you wince with how loud it is.

“Nice job telling them we’re here,” Rose mutters.

“They’ll know soon enough, let’s go.”

You step past the shattered glass and into a rather sparsely decorated room, the main feature of which is the fireplace to the right. Clayton, in the lead, warily steps into the room, guns sweeping left and right. Nothing happens, so he moves forward, just as you and Rose both shout “Watch out!”

You raise your arms and start concentrating on creating a Barrier around the group but Jaden is already in motion, hauling him back as a wall of fire erupts from the fireplace. It fades out, and you put your arms down.

“Thanks,” says Clayton. “This house is going to be fun to navigate, isn’t it?”

“Is it still there?” you ask Rose, who carefully edges towards it from the side. She shakes her head.

“Spell trap, one time use only, it’s safe.”

“Can we get this alarm turned off?” shouts Jaden.

Before anyone can answer you hear a scream from further in the house, and gunfire, which sounds close. Clayton takes off to the right, then leans around the corner to the left, raising his guns. You all rush after him into a narrow hallway, and see one of the SWAT team members is being pulled by two other guys from one end and a green tentacle from the other. Another SWAT guy is firing over their heads as more tentacles are reaching up from the floor towards them. Clayton starts shooting out of his right gun, the one with the unlimited ammo, and Rose darts forward, swinging her wand. Fire shoots out and hits the tentacle, burning it while bullets slam into it from Clayton. It releases and the guy gets pulled up, then they all start firing at the creature that must be somewhere underneath an illusionary floor.

“We’ll hold this thing off, you guys go!” shouts one of them. Clayton nods, but then notices the security system box on the wall, and grabs his data cable, jacking into it. You guess he’s trying to hack it to turn off, which he does in about fifteen seconds. The alarm goes off, restoring blissful silence. As blissful a silence can be that’s punctuated by shouts and gunfire as the guys at the door try to hold off the tentacle monster. He unplugs and puts his cable away, picking up his guns and moving down the hallway away from the front door. You get a weird feeling as you look right. It leads into the kitchen, and grab Clayton’s shoulder.

“Better let Jaden go first,” you say.

“Sure, whatever,” he replies, making room. She cautiously steps forward and into the kitchen area. In front of her, on the back wall is the sink, though there is a stove and bar like setup with stools slightly to the left between the sink and her. To the right is the refrigerator, and a cabinet, then some shelves further on. As she steps into the room, the knife block by the sink suddenly disgorges all its knives, which whip around and fly straight at her, across the room. She steps forward to meet them, knocking most of them out of the air with a series of fast strikes you almost can’t follow. You wince as she lets some of them hit her, but then remember her Invulnerability. *The ones she hit would have probably gone past her and been a problem for us, that’s why she took care of them.* As soon as they strike her or she swats them they fall to the ground, unmoving.

“I guess O.I.F. doesn’t have company over,” says Rose, peaking out from behind you.

“Not more than once,” you reply.

Suddenly, the knobs on the stove turn on full blast, and fire shoots out, straight up into the air. It starts twisting around, forming into a column of fire.

“You’re not immune to that if it’s magical fire,” Rose shouts to Jaden, “Be careful!”

The fire curves down and touches the ground, becoming a creature of some sort, taking on a person like form with long arms. You can see the fire shooting out of the grills and maintaining it, going right into the creature’s back. It seems to soundlessly roar at you and take a step forward. Rose starts another spell, which she casts instantly. Bands of force wrap around the creature, which doesn’t even seem to notice them as it just flows right around them.

“Crap,” she says, “uh, new spell, new spell...” The bands disappear.

Clayton fires at it, but the bullets pass right through and start tearing up the other side of the room. The creature takes another step.

“Uh, any time,” says Jaden, taking a step back.

Rose casts again, and water splashes down on the creature, making it flicker and soundlessly scream, but a second later it’s back to full strength again, and takes another step. You all take a step back, what the heck is going to stop this thing?

“Wait a second,” you say, “we’re going about this all wrong.”

You look over at the stove, and you can see the knobs, so you target them with Telekinesis, getting a seventeen. There's four of them, that means your difficulty increases by four, but they're just knobs. You easily give them a twist all at once, cutting the gas off to the creature and making him instantly fade out.

"Oh yeah," says Rose. "I could have done that. That was a new one on me, by the way. Elemental Creature, maybe? Weird."

"Help me!" a voice down the hallway to the left shouts, "I'm tied up over here, they're going to kill me!"

"Come on," says Clayton, "but stay on your toes."

You all carefully make your way down the hallway to the left, the SWAT guys covering behind you. You pass a door that's closed on your right, an open archway leading to the dining room, and a window all on your left. To your right is a laundry room which is open, and another door to the right that's closed. Ahead it looks like a bedroom, and the voice shouts again, "In here, please hurry, I don't want to die!"

You all move into the bedroom, where against the far wall is a chained up woman, disheveled and beautiful. There's a large Jacuzzi tub here, and a bathroom off to the left.

"Oh thank goodness you've come to save me," the figure says. "Please hurry!"

"Rose?" asks Clayton.

"There's magic coming from her, she may be under some kind of spell. There don't seem to be any traps in the room though."

"Shall we just leave her for now?" asks Jaden, her tone implying that she does not actually want an affirmative answer to this question.

"We can't just ignore her!" Rose pleads. This makes you think, *doesn't she have Easily Infatuated?*

"All right, but carefully. Cover us," he says to the SWAT guys, who nod and take up positions around the room.

He carefully goes over to her, and she wiggles provocatively in her bonds, making you wonder... You do an ESP check, getting an eight, so you fail. Sadly, in this case, failure means you actually register her as a person. Which she isn't, as you are about to learn in just a second. You suppose she's real then, and think, "Eh, what the heck?" and then "I declare, card 19." You're not going to get another chance to use it on this adventure, after all, right? Immediately, you fall in love with this helpless, voluptuous lady, and you can't help wrapping your arms around her to comfort her in this, her hour of greatest need.

Oh, but your heart sings a glorious song for the new love you have found, in this, the most unlikely of places. How can you ever express the deep emotion stirred in you by the plight of this poor, innocent woman? Perhaps a song? A poem might begin to describe her delicate features, that cute button nose, those sparkling eyes that even now, look at you with something akin to revulsion and loathing as you-

Wait.

What?

Of course, she's been through so much, it will take time for her to trust again! It's only natural for her to be suspicious, you must reassure her you mean no harm.

"We'll have you out of those bonds in just a moment," you say, looking into her bright, lovely eyes. "Then we will take you away from here and keep you safe, and never again will you be subjected to this kind of treatment!"

"Oh, uh, thanks," says the woman. Oh, but her voice is like that of the angels, coming from a surround sound system fitted with Silver Rock Signature hand carved wooden volume control knobs at only \$500 apiece, and using a \$7,000 AudioQuest NRG Wel Signature Series 6ft power cable, and connected with only the finest \$9,000 AudioQuest K2 Terminated Speaker Cables. Of course the speakers are housed in only the finest, most expensive wood, and all the wood grain has been matched up to minimize jitter and unwanted resonances.

Sorry, you got distracted again, what was going on? Oh right, your new love!

You roll Rend on the chain link holding her hands together and use maximum energy to impress her with your ESPer skills. You can only hope that one day she might love you as much as you now love her. You finally get a chance to use your Energy Siphon background, and spend twelve energy, getting a... four damage on the attempt.

You hate yourself and your life. How could you have gotten such a low result at this, the most critical of times? Does the universe hate you? Does it want to see you fail? Wait, there's still one chance!

You hastily spend an XP to make the check again, and this time you get an 18, and the chain shatters, freeing her. You help her stand up, and she shakes her arms out.

At least I got one XP total for playing the card, you think. Oh well.

"Thanks," the woman says, her velvet voice setting your heart a

flutter. “Now die!”

Again, what?

She changes before your very eyes, and takes a swipe at you with the hideous claws that now sprout from her fingers. You’re so shocked you don’t even dodge, meaning you take nine damage to the body and stagger back. The betrayal cutting you far, far more deeply than any physical attack she could conceive ever could. You stagger backwards, and Jaden casts a spell, slamming the now transformed creature into the wall behind her. She hisses, and raises her arms.

Bullets slam into it from all sides, but don’t seem to be hurting it. You look down at your tattered and ruined flesh. Even now it is beginning to knit itself back together, thanks to the ring of Regeneration you bought a while ago. But will your poor, shattered heart, trembling now like an opera singers bosom, ever heal as completely?

“Cease fire!” yells Clayton, “It’s immune to weapons fire! Jaden, you’re up! Rose, heal Jake!”

“No,” you weakly cry, “don’t hurt her, she must be under some kind of curse. Fight it my love, come back to me!”

“My love?” says Clayton, unbelieving. “Oh my- you used card 19, didn’t you? Idiot!” He puts his guns into his inventory and they vanish. He and Jaden step up and start taking swings at the creature, who has now grown to be twice as tall as a person. The creature is still transforming, bristling with razor edges and points, making it difficult to get in a good hit. Rose flutters down to you.

“I’ll cast Regeneration on you,” she says, “just stay still.”

“Don’t bother, I have Regeneration, remember?” you say, holding your ring up. “Go help them!”

“If you say so,” she says, uncertain, and starts flinging fire at the creature.

You use one of the lesser known facets of Sending, putting a random jumble of thoughts into the creature’s head and distracting it, allowing the others to finally finish it off. Which happens, making it disappear in a puff of smoke and shattered dreams. *Ah love, what a many fickle thing you are, you think. How cruel is fate to make me lose my blossoming love like this.*

The others stand and recover a moment, and you finish healing. Though of course your broken heart will never be the same. While the grievous injury to your chest may heal without even a scar, your heart is a different matter- how will you ever trust again?

“I thought you had some kind of *plan*,” says Clayton, coming over to you. “Grabbing her like that, and then just standing there while she cut you up? What were you thinking, using that card on her? Are you all right?”

You show him your wound has already healed, and stand up. “I did an ESP check on her and I must have failed it. I thought she was a real person. Honest. What was it, anyway?”

“Probably Magical Ally: Major,” says Rose. “I thought she was under a spell, turned out she literally *was* a spell.”

“That’s why you didn’t whine about us killing it,” Clayton says thoughtfully.

“I don’t whine about it, I suggest killing stuff is a bad idea!”

“Can we talk about this later? There’s still an invisible person to catch, yes?” says Jaden.

“Right, sorry. Everyone all right? Let’s check these other doors and get on with this,” says Clayton, taking his guns out again.

The second door you passed just seems to be an office, there’s a desk and computers and shelves and things, and nothing leaps out to kill you. You move back into the kitchen. The other door is a set of stairs going down, and Clayton flips the light on and looks down.

“No magic on the stairs,” says Rose.

“Wait for my signal,” says Clayton to the SWAT guys.

You all descend, and immediately to your right is an open door that seems to go into an office, a closed door ahead of you, and around the stairs is another door. There’s a big open area to the left, and four people are standing there, waiting expectantly. Apart from some beams holding the house up, the room is empty, but there are two doors beyond them on the far wall.

Rose gives a little laugh. “So you survived those skeletons after all,” she shouts over to them. The most normal one answers back. “That was you who did that? Figures.”

“I thought you were asleep, so I didn’t want to bother you about the ice. And those skeletons looked so bored, I figured they wanted to play with someone. You were the only person around, so...”

The others look at him. “You got messed up by a fairy?” says the burly guy with the cyber... everything, and holding a very, very large gun.

“We all got messed up by them,” says the guy in the wizard’s robe. “And they took out the house defenses too.”

“Well duh,” says the guy in the martial arts uniform. “They’re here, aren’t they?”

“So, what, we have to beat you to get by and find the person we came for?” you ask.

“That’s right,” answers the cyborg, leveling his gun. “And we’re going to capture you now so you stop getting in the boss’ way. Not you, Clayton, the boss wants to kill you personally for that time you escaped.”

“They’re welcome to try,” says Clayton, bringing up his own guns. “Switch it out just like before?” he asks.

The others, including you, nod, and you focus on the martial artist. Time to end this, once and for all.

Initiative is rolled.

The cyborg raises his huge gun to fire, and as his finger squeezes on the trigger you can’t help thinking, *didn’t they just say they were going to capture us?* Bullets streak out of the barrel, which starts rotating, and you don’t have time to react, but Jaden does. She blurs past you all and into the line of fire, bullets bouncing off her left and right. The cyborg seems a bit surprised, and you are too, she must have put energy into speed to cover the distance like that. She slams the gun into the ground, and bullets start scuffing up the carpet, causing Clayton to say “plastic bullets” for your benefit. You guess they aren’t seriously trying to killing you, after all.

Next to you, Rose shouts something as she waves her wand about, and all four of them are shoved back, but only enough to stun them for a second. They didn’t travel enough distance to really get hurt. The ESPer must have gone on the same initiative, because as Rose casts the spell that shoves him back, he looks over at Jaden who goes flying to her right towards the wall. Rather than fighting it, Jaden makes a Martial Arts check and does a flip, palming one of her electro-toys as her feet touch the wall. She tenses, and it’s her action, along with Clayton who does a called shot to the ESPer’s leg.

Jaden pushes off the wall and makes an attack on the cyborg, making a called shot to the body. It’s made of metal just like the rest of him. She slaps the device down on his chest as she lands in front of him, and it goes off as she pulls her hand back. There’s a spark, and the cyborg yells, but doesn’t go down.

“Shielded?” she shouts. “That figures.”

Meanwhile, Clayton shoots the ESPer in the right leg for four damage, which was hardly worth it. He doesn't want to kill the guy though, especially in front of Rose.

The wizard starts casting, and a circle appears around Rose, who mutters "Oh no you don't." and starts casting herself as a reactive action.

Jaden magnetically hooks another taser bomb onto her glove and smashes it into the cyborg, who is of course totally outmatched. There's a smaller zot and the cyborg yells "Would you stop that? It tickles!"

The martial artist for the other side leaps over and takes a swipe at Jaden as she's attacking the cyborg, so she uses her off hand action to knock his attack away. *Man she's fast, you think. Guess that's what a 10 REFlexes looks like.*

You finally get to act, and you take a split second to look over your opponents. You want to see where you can do the most damage. The ESPer, having just been shot in the leg, seems more worried about blood loss at the moment than fighting. The martial artist is going to have his hands full when Jaden turns her attention to him, so he's already dead, even if he doesn't know it. The cyborg, after being shocked twice, has taken one of his massive, metal hands off his gun. This has possibilities, as standing right next to him is the wizard, about to cast a spell someplace. You spend maximum energy on RESolve and haul the cyborg's metallic fist towards the wizard, who was certainly not expecting an attack from that direction! You're now down to 30 energy, but you are rewarded with a thirty-one on your check. The cyborg can't possibly resist your efforts, even with his bonus for being made of metal, nor can the wizard escape by dodging.

What this means for the wizard is that a fist smashes into his right leg as the cyborg fights for control of his own limb. That pretty much pulps it, causing him to lose the spell he was casting at Rose. And Rose will tell you, backlash isn't pretty. The wizard screams as ice envelops him, cutting him off and letting him know exactly what he was going to do to Rose. After all, he could freeze people with magic, but he had never been frozen with magic. That didn't seem fair to you. His absolute look of horror is now frozen in place, which mirrors the look the cyborg gives you as he tries to get his hand away from your Telekinesis.

As if you would let go with a roll like that?

Rose stops casting, of course, and thanks you as she looks for something to do instead.

Jaden throws a punch at the martial artist, who, surprised she can move so fast, tries to dodge. No dice, he gets a fist full of hurting for his troubles as she does 12 damage to his left arm.

The cyborg, still trying to get control of his hand back, tries to raise his gun but Jaden is still right there and takes a reactive action to stomp it back down to the ground. With him being off balance from your hold on his other hand, the gun clatters to the ground, and the cyborg curses.

The ESPer looks at you, and you feel a weird power coming from him, trying to make you lose your hold on the cyborg's hand. You make a RESolve check, which seems to be the thing to do, and you succeed. The ESPer is now looking daggers at you, but don't really hurt you like real daggers would have. You give him a little grin, there's too much anger in the world, don't you think?

Jaden, Rose and Clayton all go at the same time, with Clayton again targeting the ESPer. This time doing a called shot to the right leg. Injure the area once, injure it again, that's what you imagine his motto to be. He gets a seventeen and again nicks the leg, doing even less damage this time, a three.

You can't help but wonder why damage isn't somehow tied to the hit roll. After all, a seventeen means he hit the leg square on, right? It's better than the best NPC can do. And a bullet smashing into a leg should do a lot of damage, yet somehow it doesn't.

Unbeknownst to you, the Observer, the Narrator looks over to the Creator, who shrugs and says "What?"

So he rolls his eyes and goes ahead and makes an off hand attack, same called shot, realizing this more than doubles his current delay. He hits again and does six damage, but the ESPer is still up. You hear him muttering something about Rose and not killing. *Ah, no wonder he's not just sending his REFlexes in bullets at the guy and filling him with holes.*

Rose casts Immobilize on the martial artist, with that damaged arm he doesn't have much chance to resist, but he tries anyway. Jaden, attacking simultaneously with all this going on, gets a two on her hit location again, so by sheer chance she totally shatters the martial artist's arm, making him scream in pain.

Jaden is up again, but she looks a little hesitant, given that she

didn't mean to cause that much damage to his arm again. It was just random chance. Instead of making with more hurting she looks to the two still (somewhat) standing. "Do you want to continue," she asks, kicking the cyborg's gun away.

"Enough!" says a loud voice throughout the room. "I should have figured you wouldn't even slow them down. Let them through."

"But boss-" starts the cyborg.

"Fool!" says the voice. "You must see you can't win!"

"Oh, all right," he says, relaxing his arm. "It's this door, go on through."

You and the others move to the other side of the room, Clayton covering them with his guns. The martial artist is rocking, trying to hold his shattered arm, but the spell won't let him move his other arm enough, and Rose goes over to him. She points at the other side of the room.

"You, move," she says, looking at the cyborg. "I'll heal you all, but only if you promise to give yourselves up to the SWAT team at the top of the stairs."

"I don't care about them, I'm out of here," he says, opening the other door and making a run for it, slamming the door behind him.

"Do we go after him?" you ask.

"Leave him, the place is surrounded. He'll get caught," replies Clayton. "Are you serious about healing them?"

"Yes I am. I won't have them dying from their wounds here, as you well know."

"Fine, get on with it."

Rose casts Regeneration on them, all at once to conserve energy, after they are surrounded by the SWAT team that Clayton calls down the stairs.

"What were you casting?" Jaden asks her, referring to the spell she was casting at the wizard.

"Thaw. I knew he was trying to freeze me like Belquis, it seems to be a popular spell for these guys. Good job distracting him," she says to you.

"I aim to please."

Rose casts again. "Okay, the anti-invisibility spell is up, let's go get O.I.F. at long last."

You couldn't agree more.

Opening the door you see it's a kind of workshop hallway leading

into another room, and you glance around. Surgical tools of all kinds are neatly put away on shelves while magically active substances and items in the process of being Imbued lay scattered about. Moving to the end of the hall you see it opens into a converted garage... converted into a grizzly parody of a surgical theater. Looking like a cross between a torture chamber and hospital room, computer equipment and magical symbols line the walls. Your ESP tells you there has been pain here- pain, hatred, suffering and death. This place has a true darkness about it, and you resist the urge to just set the whole place on fire and be done with it.

Across the room is a table with straps bolted onto it, that's obviously been pushed from the center of the room to make a space for the inevitable fight to come. On the table, a figure shimmers into existence and looks at her hands as though seeing them for the first time in many years.

"Oh bugger," she says, "you would have to have that spell going, wouldn't you?"

Wait- O.I.F. is a woman?

"Congratulations," she says, hopping down from the table and leaning on it. The skirt of her brightly colored sun dress flairs out about her legs, possibly a calculated move on her part to distract you. It worked. "You're the first people to see me in..." she thinks a moment. "Two hundred years or so, I guess?"

You wonder why a person that's been invisible for two hundred years would bother with clothes. But then, this person does seem to meticulously plan everything, so she might have put something on just in case Rose did bring anti-invisibility along with her. Staring at her, you wonder *is it possible she's that old?* She doesn't look it, in fact if she had a LOOKs lower than nine you would be surprised. Her face and body are perfect, toned, radiant, and her long black hair shimmers in the harsh overhead lights. Her perfect proportions draw the eye downward, and you catch both Rose and Jaden gapping at her as well. Maybe you should concentrate on catching her now, staring later? You can always take a picture, but if what she says is true, it might not last longer.

"Yes, yes," she continues. "I know what you're thinking. When I was fifty years old I made myself immortal with magic, and ever since then I've been slowly increasing my stats with magic as well. I was then able to reach the perfection you see before you."

"You're under arrest on suspicion of murder, human trafficking, destruction of public property, misuse of magic, the whole nine yards,"

says Clayton seriously. “Turn around and get on your knees, hands on your head.”

She laughs, and it’s almost like the room gets a little dimmer while she gets a little brighter. Oh, if only you could make her laugh like that! Why did you spend that card on the construct upstairs? This is truly perfection before you, a woman worthy of your affections.

“Is that all? Goodness, in two hundred years you would hardly think I tried with that short a list.”

“Turn around. I will shoot you, and I have the same card I used before so don’t think it won’t hurt.”

She sighs. “Yes, those cards are a problem. One can never be sure what a PC will have, or if the Narrator will use some against you or not. They’re something not even I can plan for. I still owe you for that, Clayton, and you’ll pay for it, don’t you worry.”

“Why did you do it?” demands Rose. “A person as... as... pretty and smart and cunning as you could have saved people! You could have done so much good in the world!”

“Why Rose, who says my actions are not doing good in the world? And you haven’t proven that I had anything to do with Clayton’s big, bad list of crimes, have you? He said I’m being arrested on the *suspicion* of those things, not the *certainty*. In any case, even if I did those things, and I admit to nothing, number seven on the Overload List says I should refuse your offer, and shoot you immediately when you ask that.”

“The what?” asks Rose, as the woman clenches her fists and two blades, seemingly made of fire, appear in each hand.

“Accelerate,” she says, and literally blurs towards Clayton, swinging.

Clayton barely dodges out of the way as first one blade, then the other goes screaming through the air with the intent on slicing him. Rose whips her wand forward and says something, but the woman says the same thing, and you feel two pulses of magic smash into each other and dissipate between them.

Jaden comes at her from the side, and she whirls, fending off Jaden’s blows with her blades, putting Jaden at a huge disadvantage. She manages to catch Jaden’s fist on the flat of her blade, and Jaden yanks back, her fingers burned.

She tries again, but this time the woman slashes her arm as Jaden goes to hit, and she cries out and leaps back, badly cut.

It's your action, and you know you have to separate them or at least distract this mad woman as it looks like she's going to cut Jaden again. You raise your hand and grab a heavy looking piece of medical equipment with Telekinesis to fling at her. She hardly hesitates, spinning and chopping it in half with one smooth motion, and the pieces go flying. Well, that's two energy and another eight delay for you, and you dejectedly sink back into spectator mode. People with a delay of two just should not be allowed to fight, you know?

Jaden tries to sweep the woman's legs, figuring it would be harder to parry that action with a sword, which is correct, and she tries to jump over it. You would swear she doesn't, but then somehow she does. *The Narrator is spending XP on her behalf?* Crap, he does want to give your team a run for the money, doesn't he?

"Armor!" shouts Rose, causing Jaden to hold her action, so they no longer go at the same time.

Rose casts Armor Of Magic on Jaden, putting energy into it to get it instantly, and magical armor forms around her. Jaden lashes two kicks at the woman, one right after the other. One very nearly hits, the other goes wide, but she's still unharmed and holding her own. In fact you have the distinct impression she's toying with Jaden, letting her almost hit like she's not even putting her full effort into it.

Clayton means to change that.

"I declare, card 7. I declare, card 10," he says in rapid succession. Two cards appear and disappear, and once again Clayton can not fail at any action he now decides to make. He makes a called shot to her leg, hoping to take her down, and uses five bullets because he's not messing around anymore.

The bullets rip through any defenses she has due to card 10, and hit because of card 7. They smash into her leg, shattering it with 21 points of owwie-ow, no holds barred, "I've just been shot" damage. She starts to crumple, and Clayton grins, thinking he's won yet again. No magic can carry her away this time, thanks to the wizards outside. His grin fades as she shimmers and straightens up again, seemingly whole all at once.

"Nice try," she says, smirking.

"Spell Trigger!" Rose says, disgusted. "She must have changed it!"

It's your action again, and so far keeping her in a defensive mode has proved rather successful, so you figure to keep it up. She's moving fast, way faster than you would have thought possible against four

people. Being outnumbered is supposed to make it easier for the people that outnumber! Maybe it's time to turn her own weapons against her with the trick you used on the cyborg a minute ago? You make a grab for her hand with Telekinesis, getting a fifteen with your minus three penalty for the called shot. However her STrength must be incredible, as she just glances at you while her hand twitches a little bit and doesn't move. Your hold is broken. Crap, not only did you fail, she knows exactly what you tried to do. How humiliating!

Jaden's up, and again tries kicking her, but again she dodges. Jaden is starting to look a little upset, apparently no one has ever dodged her this many times before. Rose casts something on Jaden again, but apparently it isn't enough, and throws you something, saying "Use this, quick!"

It's card 34, and you declare it, adding your INSight to her roll. This is a seven, the highest of the party because you're the ESPer. The spell goes off, and Jaden nods seriously to Rose in thanks, and turns back to the woman. Her defensive action delay has finally cleared, and she and Clayton go again. Though it's clear she'd like to deal with Clayton first, with Jaden in her face that won't be possible. She takes a couple of swings at Jaden, who instead of dodging, tries catching her fists. With her new martial arts skill of seventeen, she easily does so. The woman is distracted by Clayton shooting at her, so she can't make an effective STrength check to break free just yet. Of course the bullets bounce right off, making Clayton think he's now useless, which is probably true.

Now gripping her hands, Jaden jumps and smashes both feet into the woman, who now makes a STrength check to break free and an active dodge to get out of the way. Jaden gets a 28 on her martial arts check, but the woman spends 10 energy on her first check and gets a 32, easily breaking free and allowing her to try and roll with the damage. She's already spent energy on STrength though, so she fails, and Jaden gets her in the body for eleven damage. She grunts, but doesn't go down, instead bringing her swords up like nothing happened.

"At least I finally hit her!" Jaden says brightly, as speaking is a free action.

You're up again, and you have an idea- let's get rid of those swords! There's a hose coiled up in the corner, probably for washing up... after. You grab it while you use Telekinesis to twist the handle, making water start pouring out. Let's see if those swords can stay around if you douse them with this!

“Shoot!” says the woman, realizing your plan. She looks over at you and gestures, only two fingers on her sword, and says something magical. The water coming out of the hose instantly freezes, traveling up the hose and blocking it totally. Oh well, it was a good plan, right?

Rose flies over to you and starts casting, taking extra time, probably because of all the magic she’s currently maintaining. You figure she’s probably casting Thaw, and hold the hose out to her.

“Oh no you don’t little fairy!” shouts the woman, and casts again, a circle appearing around Rose. She has a look of horror, she’s already casting thaw once, she doesn’t want to lose it right now. That’s when Clayton mans up like the true hero he is.

“I declare card 26,” he says, and puts his hand down over the magical circle on the floor underneath Rose. The card, with glasses guy waving goodbye over his shoulder appears and disappears, and the spell is redirected to Clayton, encasing him in ice instead.

“That worked out,” says the woman with a snort. Obviously trying not to laugh, probably some other no-no on her so called “overlord list.”

“Unfreeze him you female dog!” says Jaden, coming in for another attack. The woman easily dodges, apparently no longer wanting to toy with her. Jaden looks confused for a second and says “I declare, card 33. Thanks Clayton.”

Apparently now that he’s frozen in ice, Clayton willed his cards to Jaden, and so she took advantage.

Reality seems to twist around as the woman dodges Jaden’s kicks, and an open bracelet flies off her upper arm and she stops blurring like she was. “Oh crap!” she says, reaching for it and losing one of her swords. The card guides it into Jaden’s waiting hand, who spends one of her two XP for an extra action, slipping it on and saying “Accelerate!” just like the woman did. Her eyes light up as she gets all blurry, realizing she’s now under the effects of a very strong Acceleration spell.

“Give that back!” the woman shouts, going to grab for it.

Rose finishes casting, as the water from the hose starts flowing again, and she looks over at Clayton. She’ll probably thaw him out next.

Jaden is winding up to finish this fight, because Acceleration magic, as she is about to discover, makes anything you do with REFlexes better. Specifically, she gets a bonus equal to the Mercury rating of the caster, and guess what stat her chosen martial art, Kung Fu, depends on?

That's right, REFlexes! She now adds 25 to her roll to hit, thanks to both Rose's magic and her now stolen magical item. As an added bonus, her opponent no longer gets that bonus to dodging. Jaden attacks, hitting both times and staggering her just a little.

"Go down!" Jaden shouts, obviously wondering how this woman is still up.

"Haven't figured it out yet, have you?"

"Figured out what?"

"Sorry, number 6 on the list, no gloating until you're dead."

"Gloat this," you say, telekinetically directing the water from the hose towards the woman's remaining sword. You get a thirteen, almost minimum, and declare the use of card 25, rolling again. You get a seventeen that time, but she still dodges it. Even without her Acceleration, she's a slippery customer, apparently.

Jaden and the woman attack each other simultaneously, with the woman getting a fifteen, and Jaden getting a 39, her maximum. The blade bounces off the magical armor around Jaden, while she kicks the woman in the head, not that it seems to do much good.

Jaden attacks again, this time making a called shot to the body and using her other leg as well, doing fourteen damage. This raises the total to an astonishing 44 total damage, but still the woman remains standing. She now looks like she's at least feeling it a little more.

Rose starts thawing out Clayton, again taking all the time she can to get the spell off.

"Oh, you are magnificent, aren't you?" says the woman to Jaden. "If I could study you, the things I would learn! But I think this has gone on long enough."

She swirls her hands dramatically, and power flickers all around her as she speaks the words of the spell and the magical circle appears under her feet. Flames erupt around the circle, obscuring her. As they vanish, standing in place of the woman is a figure in gleaming armor, twice as tall as she was before. Her sword, still made of fire, is now sheathed in flame as well. *Is that... even possible?*

"Come at me now, little martial arts user!" taunts the figure. "The flame has been doubled!"

It's your turn again, but what can you do against something like that? Still, you're not one to give up, so you throw something else in the room at her, which she takes a swing at but somehow misses. It bounces off the armor, clattering to the ground. Well, at least you learned she

wasn't being covered by an Illusion? That armor of hers is real.

Rose finishes casting, and Clayton thaws out, leaving him shivering with cold while otherwise unharmed. He looks at the figure now before him and mutters that he should have brought a bigger gun.

"Hold her off, I'm almost out of energy," says Rose, "so this last spell will be it for me!"

"You can't beat me," the armored figure shouts, bringing her sword to bear on Jaden, who swats it away, making the armor around her glow and deflect the fire.

She then counter attacks, but now the two are evenly matched, both have magical armor so neither one can hurt the other.

They trade blows, and Rose starts casting again, a circle appearing under the woman. She seems to be really concentrating and taking her time on the spell. Clayton opens up with his guns, knowing that even if he somehow bypasses that armor, she's still probably Invulnerable, so he really can't contribute anything else.

You try Cryokineses at the same time, but you're not sure if it does anything, and finally Rose finishes casting.

"Whatever you're casting, I declare card 1 on Rose," Clayton shouts over his guns.

"If it's a mental stat I declare card 36 on Rose," you shout over Clayton's guns.

"I got nothing!" Jaden shouts over Clayton's guns.

Rose gets a twenty five, but the woman spends max energy and beats her with a 37. "Oh no you don't," she mutters, "not after all that." She spends three of her 4 XP for a success, and the imposing figure before you turns into a tiny version of itself, shrinking down several size modifiers until she's smaller than Rose.

"I love that spell," says Rose, panting.

"Oh no!" says the tiny figure, looking up at you all. She turns to scamper away, but even with her amazing stats, she's still about the size of a mouse. You easily grab her with Telekinesis and haul her off her feet.

"I can still do magic!" she shouts, but you hear the door opening behind you, and she stares at the figure that's come in. You all turn to look, and it's Sergeant Drauhon coming in!

"So, it looks like you've won!" he says cheerfully. "Nice work everyone."

"Help me," says the woman. "You have to get me out of here, my

love, so my work can continue!”

“My love?” everyone says, looking between the Sergeant and her.

“What are you talking about?” he replies. “Have you mistaken me for someone else?”

This of course is unseen by the others, but if you can become the Observer for a moment, you can see it; a card shimmering into existence in front of him. It’s the dark haired girl with the halo about to stab Glasses Guy with the knife she has behind her back, card 21. It disappears, and you know Draughon is about to betray someone. The Narrator has the card, he’s going to use it, just to make things more interesting.

“I see I was a fool to trust you!” she says, her voice hard. “With your promises of diverting anyone who got too close. Your words of devotion to me, how we would change the world. All lies!”

Draughon shrugs. “I think she’s gone mad. We need to get her into one of the warded cells that cancels magic out, then we can get the story out of her. Can you handle that from here, guys?”

“I’ve got six energy left, enough to open a portal at least,” replies Rose.

“Good. Nicely done everyone, I’ll see about some leave time for you after this. See you back at the base!”

He turns to leave. “Traitor!” the woman shouts after him. “Pig! I’ll see you burn for this!”

He waves without stopping to look back, and disappears around the corner, going back upstairs.

You all look at each other- what’s going on here?

“Okay, now *I* want some answers,” says Rose, fluttering over to where the woman is now hanging in space.

“Fine, I may as well tell you. Obviously my funding has dried up, so I’m done.”

“Done with what? Why abduct all these PCs? What did you do with them? Oh, and what do we call you?”

“My name is Mary,” says Mary, finally becoming a named character in the narrative. “I’ve lived the last two hundred years trying to improve myself through any means possible. But no matter what I did, I couldn’t get my skills above a five, because I wasn’t a *PC*.” She says the *PC* part dripping with sarcasm.

I wish you could hear it, she has a ten in speaking words with

sarcasm. Yes, even though she can only have fives in skills for being an NPC, she somehow manages to have a ten in that skill.

“Because I wasn’t part of a narrated story I could only be average. That’s what I was told, anyway. But I could do magic, so I started studying. Improving myself through spells. I made permanent so many spells, each one to raise a single stat to human perfection. Making Imbued items I could wear to make me more “PC” like. One day I thought to myself, it isn’t fair that a chosen few get to become extraordinary. Why should they get all the glory, the money, the skills? Why should only a few become so well known they become household names and be remembered forever? We call people like that “Player Characters” and we think there’s some big “Narrator” in the sky directing our actions while an “Observer” watches us. Rubbish, I say! So I started searching- what separates so called “PCs” from so called “NPCs” the average man and woman on the street? Isn’t every person the main character in their own story? Shouldn’t they be more than average? Think- if I could find that switch, that *key* I could share it with others, make every person on Earth extraordinary! Think what we could achieve with a million Einsteins. The art, the music, the science we could achieve if everyone was a genius in their field. That was my plan, my goal, my path to Hell.

“It started innocently enough, but I got nowhere. I tried looking at corpses of PCs, but I didn’t find anything. I dug deeper, finally deciding to dissect a living person to see what made them different. I didn’t really find anything, but I became obsessed. There must be something that makes you better than everyone else, right? Can it just be luck? The situation you find yourself in that drives you to become experts at something? Is it genetic? Environment? What?

“So I started searching in earnest, keeping tabs on those who became especially gifted, thinking whatever it was that made them so might show up better. I took old people, young people, it didn’t matter. I had to find it. That spark- that line that separates the chosen few from the masses of the world.

“And now I’ve failed. Those people that followed me, that I promised I would turn into PCs when I figured out how, will abandon me. Even the man I thought loved me has turned away, so now I have nothing. Two hundred years of trying to bring mankind to the next level, and for what? Nothing, that’s what. The world will plod on as it has, with only the chosen few able to achieve greatness in their lives. I know my methods were wrong, but my heart was in the right place. You have to

believe me, please, you have to understand that! Say you understand! Please!”

“Okay, that’s enough. Take her through and come back here, I want to make sure the house is secure before we leave for good,” says Clayton.

“Wait,” says Jaden. “How come you took so much damage from me without going down?”

“I’m *DTR 2* young one, because of my 10 CONstitution. Your attacks were non-lethal damage as far as I was concerned.”

“I should have realized. Okay, take her away.”

“No, please, you understand, right? It had to be done, to make the world better!”

Rose opens a portal over her screaming to be understood, and you can’t help feeling sorry for her. Poor, lost soul. *Is she mad*, you ask yourself? Deluded? Or just... ahead of her time? Is there something that divides the world, that can be switched on and off in a person making them ordinary or extraordinary? *Probably best not to dwell on it*, you think. *Look what it did to poor Mary.*

You follow Rose through the portal and deposit the woman into a magic denying cell, and all her trinkets are taken away from her. She looks so small and helpless now, her stats reduced once again to fives. *She’s probably not even ageless anymore, being in there.* Your heart goes out to her. Maybe if she gets the help she needs, she can put that drive of hers to good use. If she ever gets out of prison, that is.

“One more thing,” she says as you’re about to leave. “You beat me, but I was the one they chose to do the work, and they let me do it my way. The ones that come after me will be much, much, worse.” She starts laughing, and when questioned, doesn’t say more. You come out feeling very weird.

You go back through the portal and Rose closes it, then Clayton makes sure no one is around.

“Is anyone else weirded out by what Mary said, both just now and to Draughon?”

“She was raving, I think she’s lived too long,” says Rose. “Poor, beautiful person.”

“I don’t think she was. Recall, Rose, that you said there were six enemies in this house, all in the direction we went to find Mary. We

fought off four to get into this room, and Mary makes five. Where is number six? It wasn't that spell we fought, is it?"

Everyone looks around, realizing he's right.

"No, that was just magical energy in the shape of a person awhile, it wouldn't have registered as an enemy to my Detect Enemies spell."

"Was it Draughton then, and when it looked like she was going to lose, he turned on her? Or was the sixth person this mysterious one who will 'come after' Mary and be 'much, much worse?'"

"I think we're going to have to keep a very close eye on Sergeant Draughton," says Jaden.

You have a funny feeling as well, be it Precognition or ESP or what, you're not sure. You chime in, "I thought maybe finding Mary would be the end of our story, but now... maybe it's actually just the beginning."

Everyone looks at you seriously, nodding at your prophetic words.

Epilogue 1.1

You are the Observer

Three figures step into the now darkened lab, hours after the remaining magical traps and creatures inside the house were dealt with. They wear expensive suits, and making a very good perception check, one might see the hint of a similar ring on each man's right hand. The ring is a snake, eating its own tail, and they look around seriously.

"So she failed," says one.

"She didn't fail, she just got caught," says the second.

"After two hundred years, do you think she would succeed?" asks the third.

"We were prepared to wait another two hundred," says the first.

"It would have been the easier way," says the second.

"But that route now seems unlikely," finishes the third.

"We are not prepared to wait while another takes up the task," says the first.

"Even with the notes she made?" asks the second.

"I'm sure even those notes are incomplete. It would have to be started from the beginning," says the third.

"Pity."

"Indeed."

"Shall we begin the alternate plan, then?"

The three look at each other. "Agreed," they all say.

And the house is again empty.

Epilogue 1.2

You are the Observer

“So there you have it!” he says, stepping away from his computer as the image of the world shrinks down and fades out. Glancing over at the calendar, you see it is now turned to June, and leaves cover the trees outside. It seems to be getting dark, and the cat is sleeping on the couch, on top of a blanket. “I hope you enjoyed.”

Perhaps you did. After all, you made it to the end.

“Of book one,” the Narrator says, with a sly wink. “But perhaps there will be further adventures with the four? There’s still a ton of ESPer skills I want Jake to learn, and of course there’s always more magic to learn. Jaden hardly used the gadgets she spent so much time making, so we’ll need to use them sometime, won’t we? As for Clayton... well, he’s already great at what he does, so maybe he could learn some new tricks too? And of course this new group I thought of at the last second, who are they? What are their goals? Only I know for sure now!” He seems hesitant. “I guess there are some things I should apologize for.”

What’s this?

“Proofreading the story I realized a few things. Like certain weaknesses I ignored for characters, Jake’s ‘youthful’ never really came up, nor did his “no sense of direction.” I guess in my defense he only used ‘energy siphon’ and ‘thoughtful’ once, so maybe that sort of makes up for it? But I noticed others, which I apologize for. Also I really should have done more character development for these guys. You became each character, but did you really get a sense of what they thought about all this? I don’t think so, and maybe you should have a bit more. In my defense, this was one of my earliest works, and while it was published along with the Demongate High books 1-5, it was written before them. Let’s see...” He consults his computer. “Says here I created the file for this book on 3/30/12. Wow, this was actually done around the time I was working on *The Unveiled World*. As I write this it’s 6/21/14, more than two years later. You can’t see it, but I’m scowling at the Creator for reasons. Never mind. I’ve written four books since then, so hopefully I’ve improved a little?”

“I really do hope you enjoyed it, and you come back in a while for the next book!”

“Now GET OUT!”

You find yourself standing where you were before this whole adventure began.

Maybe you will go back.

Maybe.

Glossary

Backlash: Failing to cast a spell by five results in backlash, a variable reaction to uncontrolled magic usually resulting in the spell performing the opposite action it was supposed to or turning on the wizard, harming them directly.

Bilocation: An ESPer skill to mentally leave your body and travel through the world as mental energy. You can see and hear as normal wherever you go, but staying outside your body too long will cause it to wither and die.

Cards: Assigned randomly by the Narrator, cards allow a character to modify their destiny in certain ways. They can be turned in for XP at the start of an adventure or played in game to override the Narrator's actions. There are 46 in all, and their effects range from all Lethal damage being turned into Nonlethal to a bonus of 2 to any roll. Each shows a black and white drawing depicting The Dark Haired Girl, Glasses Guy or Trench Coat Man doing something, a description of what the card does, and a pithy saying at the bottom sometimes pulled from pop culture. Rumors that these are caricatures of real people are unfounded at best, ludicrous at worst. A list of all cards used in the story, in order of their appearance, appears below the Glossary.

Character Sheet: Records a character's Stats and skills, tracks XP and money and anything else important about a character. Can be consulted as a free action.

Combat Delay: While in combat, time is measured in segments, with 20 segments roughly equaling 4 seconds of action. Each action a person takes requires a time to recover, such as loosing an arrow, and reaching for another. Another example would be swinging a sword too heavy for the person wielding it. A stronger person would be faster at swinging that same sword because they could recover from a strike or block more quickly. Thus they would have a lower Combat Delay.

Combust: An ESPer skill to set things on fire. Can also be used to burn skin or warm things that are nonflammable.

Compulsion: An ESPer skill to force a person to believe or take some action you suggest.

Creator: The one who created the Rules of HDL, which were, in the time of

the great upheaval, modified and codified into The Hardcover Book of Paragon (electronic PDF copy sold separately, in stores now!). Control was then turned over to numerous Narrators, with varying competencies, agendas and followers.

Deferred Delay: An action, such as spell casting, that takes time to complete. Other examples would be running from one place to another or reloading a shotgun. These are actions that can be interrupted before they are complete, and each carries a delay specific to the action.

DTR: Defensive Threat Rating. Attacks have a certain Threat Rating, such as punches normally being 1 and bullets being 5 or more. Attacks against things with higher TR don't do damage, so punching a tank is ineffective, shooting it not much better, but exploding it will do some damage.

Energy: What allows people to put effort into doing something, such as lifting something heavy or running long distances. Most ESPer powers also consume at least some energy, as do some types of spell casting.

ESPer: A person able to effect the physical world using only the power of the mind.

Experience Points: Given by the Narrator at the end of each adventure to allow character development. Can also be used to grant second chances, defy enemies and even take control of the story, briefly, away from the Narrator.

Narrator: More akin to Lachesis, one of the three Fates in Greek mythology, who decides what a character will experience in their lives. A minor god, the Narrator must follow the rules of the Creator, as laid down in the Book Of Paragon. Chooses enemies and situations for the heroes to overcome. Religion in the world of Paragon focuses on the Creator and the Narrator, exclusively, while attitudes towards them range as much as they do here on Earth. (selfless devotion to questionable existence to disbelief)

Observer: That's you. Without an Observer, a person's story is meaningless, and may not even be said to have happened at all.

Healing Acceleration: An ESPer skill that forces the body to heal more rapidly than normal. Successfully using this skill will allow an injury to heal in only one hour what would normally take one day, until fully recovered.

Initiative: Rolled before combat or some other incipient action to see who goes

first. A function of REFlexes added to REAson, giving the order of combat and determining initial delay before a character can act.

Inventory: A semi-mystical space holding a character's equipment and valuables. Items in "inventory" are "carried" in the strictest sense, so a car could not be placed into "inventory" but a book could. Basically just saves people from having to lug stuff around, while they lug stuff around.

Invulnerable: The property of certain creatures (most notably demons) to remain totally unharmed by swords, guns, even bombs. Something that is invulnerable can only take damage from magic sources or other invulnerable things.

Imbue: The ritual of binding a spell into an object, which can then become activated by command or made permanent. Permanent spell items provide benefit continuously when worn or held, and are thus much more difficult to make. Failing your check by less than 5 creates a cursed item, the effects of which are up to the narrator.

Magical Scripture: Used to read and understand magical writings. Also used to make a copy of said writings if you wish to cast the spell without learning it, thus preserving the original should you fail, burning up whatever the spell is written on.

Magical Theory: A skill used to simulate the character's knowledge of magical effects, what kind of spells there are, and generally how magic is used. Anyone can learn this skill, in theory, but usually only magic users bother.

Maintaining Magic: In order to keep wizards from having every spell they know active at once, a variable penalty is applied for each spell maintained by the wizard. This means that every action the wizard performs, even looking around making Perception Checks, is reduced in effectiveness while the wizard maintains spells. Therefore, when maintaining even two spells, backlash can become a real danger to the inexperienced wizard.

Masking: An ESPer power to make the person using it overlooked until they perform some action that draw attention to them.

Netwalker: A piece of cybernetic hardware put into your brain that allows you to see a computer system as a physical structure. Programs within this environment are simulated, so an anti-virus program might look like a nasty guy with weapons hanging off him, while a firewall might manifest as a stone wall around a piece of information. This makes using or hacking the system easier

because you are not just seeing raw data, but rather what that data represents.

NPC-PS: The NPC Protective Services, a branch of the military tasked with taking PCs out of the general populous so their superior abilities can be correctly utilized.

Paragon: The name of the world, like the name of our world is Earth. Therefore one might say “What on Paragon” rather than “What on Earth.” Paragon is a registered trademark of Tremorworks and is used with permission. He knows I don’t have any money so suing me about it would be pointless anyway.

Phasing: Two kinds of phasing exist: Magical and ESPer. The magic kind is better, and allows free movement through the world as though the one that was phased was a ghost. This allows even attacks to pass through, while you can continue to breathe normally. ESPer phasing, however, is very inconvenient, because you can’t breathe, and your initial momentum must carry you through whatever you’re trying to phase through. You have to push against the surface you want to phase through, so it doesn’t work on attacks, and getting trapped inside a wall is a very real possibility. Use with caution!

Postcognition: An ESPer skill to see the history of a touched object in your mind.

Ranged Combat: Along with other REASON based combat skills, adjusts delay during combat allowing a character to recover from performing an action quicker. At a 5 and a 10 in this skill, one segment is reduced from delay when performing a combat action of that type.

REASON per week: Each week, a character may raise skills a number of points equal to their REASON stat. For example, to raise Computer Use from a rating 4 to a rating of 5, for a character that had a 5 REASON would take a whole week. A character with a 10 REASON would take only half that time. A character with a 2 REASON would take more than two weeks. A teacher can reduce this time, as can spending extra XP.

Rolls the Dice: Literally, rolling a number of dice, based on the stat for a character, to see how well their own body or mind performs for that action before adding their skill to the check. A staple of RPG games since the very beginning.

Sarcastic person’s middle finger: A thumbs up.

Spell Trigger: A spell allowing another spell to be triggered via an action defined at the casting of the spell. This can cause a trap to activate when someone walks past, or whisk someone away with teleportation if they are in danger of dying.

Stat Penalties: Playing a very young or very old character is of course permitted, but Stats are adjusted accordingly. Younger characters cannot spend all their initial points in Stats, instead gaining some as they age. Older characters lose physical stats and shift those points into mental ones, within reason.

Subtle Casting: A method of spellcasting that somewhat suppresses the mystical circles of magical light normally generated. Those nearby must succeed on perception checks, difficulty what you rolled in Subtle Casting, to notice

SUDO: Or “Super User Do” a command on UNIX machines, like Linux or Mac OS X, granting the issuer increased administrative rights for a single task. Used on the command line.

Unicorn’s Tunnel: What would a mystical adventure be without a Portal spell? In a game run by the Creator I played a black unicorn who developed a spell that was basically a Portal gun without the gun. Came in very handy against a bunch of zombies we met after descending a tower. I put one end of the portal at the floor and the other end on an outside wall at the top of the tower. You can imagine what happened next? Best Spell Ever.

XP: See Experience Points

Card List

Quoted text comes directly from the card itself.

Rather than numeric order, I have tried to present them in the order used.

Sorry for any confusion.

21: Mutiny- “You openly betray the party, for either the right or wrong reasons.”

35: Rally- “Everyone (including you and the Narrator) draws another card.”

31: Extra Cash- “You have enough money to afford that one thing you really need.”

16: Hidden Agenda- “You have some secret plan, which may or may not work against the goals of the rest of the party.”

33: Lucky Break- “Fate smiles upon you, and somehow intervenes just when you need it.”

14: Experience Bonus- “Gain 2 EXP.”

38: Gimme Gimme- “Choose any single card from the discard pile, and either play it or add it to your hand.”

30: Power Overwhelming- “For the remainder of the current scene, your maximum Energy expenditure per action is unlimited. Of course, your Energy total is not affected.”

37: Unfailing Resolve- “Increase a single mental stat by 2 for a single dice roll. This card must be played before any dice are rolled.”

5: What a Rush- “Increase a single physical stat by 2 for a single dice roll. This card must be played before any dice are rolled.”

11: Damage Reduction- “The total damage you suffer from a single attack is reduced by half.”

23: Personal Stake- “You have a driving personal need to see the current plot or party objective through. Exactly what that need is, though, is up to you.”

41: Contact- “You know someone in the area who can be of assistance.”

34: Assist- “Add your INS to a single roll made by another character.”

29: Wild- “This card can be played as any other card, including role-playing cards.”

12: Disaster Strikes- “Something terrible happens! This affects the entire party, and everyone affected receives 3 EXP for it.”

18: I’m Glad I Brought this Shotgun- “You are now armed. If the weapon you choose is a firearm, it has its full payload but no more.”

24: Retry- “Re-roll a single dice roll.”

27: Skill- “Make a single skill check in which you have no skill rating as if you

had a rating of 5. You must still meet any prerequisites for the skill.”

2: Bonus- “Add +2 to a single dice roll.”

45: Endless Ammo- “For the rest of this scene, you don’t need to reload (but you must reload when the scene is over).”

13: Experience Bonus- “Gain 2 EXP.”

43: I Took a Night Class- “Learn or increase a single spell or skill to any rating you can afford, without the need to spend any time or make any other checks.”

32: Damage Add: “Increase the damage inflicted by a single successful attack by 50%.”

36: Unfailing Resolve- “Increase a single mental stat by 2 for a single dice roll. This card must be played before any dice are rolled.”

26: Sacrifice- “You willingly give yourself up for the sake of others. Note that this does not necessarily mean giving your life.”

7: Success- “Automatically succeed on a single dice roll. The attempt must be some- thing at which you could feasibly succeed.”

44: Made You Look- “A single opponent’s Delay increases by 10.”

10: Critical Strike- “A single successful attack bypasses all the target’s defenses, including armor and DTR.”

19: Love Interest- “You fall in love with another character (PC or NPC).”

25: Retry- “Re-roll a single dice roll.”

42: WTF- “Reality warps in your favor. The exact result of this is up to the Narrator, but the end result is that you probably succeed at whatever you’re trying to do.”

22: Failure- “An opponent automatically fails a single dice roll.”

17: Hint- “Receive a hint from the Narrator as to how to overcome some issue or problem.”

46: It’s not as Bad as it Looks- “All Lethal damage you have currently sustained becomes Nonlethal. This effect is immediate and permanent, but does not affect further damage you might suffer.”

1: Bonus- “Add +2 to a single dice roll.”

